Limerence

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Limerence

by orphan_account

Summary

If Will’s guard was truly down, he would allow himself to feel almost cherished.

A post-apocalyptic AU in which Hannibal - leader of a cannibalistic camp of survivors - decides not to eat Will and instead grows quite fond of him.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1

With the setting sun looming threateningly behind him, Will manoeuvred through the rusted bodies of the old cars still queued on the overpass, not bothering to peer through the cracked windows in the knowledge that they had all been looted long ago. The days were warmer now and he had overestimated the hours of sunlight, stepping out of the near-bare liquor store, startled to see that the sky already held signs that dusk was fast approaching. He'd been further from home than he thought too, wandering through an old high-street, trying his luck in each shop and finding barely enough supplies to get by on scattered across the sparse and dusty shelves. The prospect of tinned food, medicine and soap had pulled him further down the wide, barren pavement until the liqueur store had come into sight and he'd settled for bottle of whisky he found at the back. Not surprisingly, when this all begun, alcohol had not been a top priority for the crowds of fearful people who swarmed and trampled one another in an attempt to gather enough to survive. The store was only emptied later, by survivors looking for way to dull the pain caused by the crumbling world around them.

A sickening cry rose from the grate beneath his feet and Will spurred himself faster still, hand gripping the gun at his belt. He wondered if a shot from his 9mm would have much of an impact on the demonic creatures that lurked underground and hoped he wouldn't have to find out. With the fortified apartment block he called a home coming into site, he felt his terror fading. He pushed the creaking door to the foyer open just as the last slither of sun sunk from the sky and the grim screaming grew louder behind him. He did not slow his pace as he scaled the stairs, passing floor after floor until he reached the fifth and slammed the door of 5C shut behind him.

Winston, the scruffy mutt he'd found limping around the charred corpse of his previous master, greeted him with a desperate whine for food and attention. He was thin, yet better fed than Will himself, and frantic for being cooped up in such a small space. He was also the only companion Will had had in the last six years. At some point during that time, Will had said his last word. He couldn’t remember the exact point at which he stopped speaking but now he and Winston got along just fine with hand gestures and whistles alone. Crouching in a silent greeting, he scratched his friend behind the ears and flipped his backpack open to reveal a dented tin of soup, more than a year past it's 'use by' date but edible as far as Will was concerned. Still, he sniffed it warily as he carved at the lid with his penknife and then got to his feet to find a pan to heat it in.

The three rooms he occupied had formerly belonged to a young woman as far as he could tell, and one that either did not cook for herself often or found it necessary to take her entire kitchen with her when she fled. Still, the one small saucepan she did leave was enough when Will rarely had a chance to eat anyway. He collapsed onto a floor cushion near the little butane stove, lighting it with his zippo and resting his arm on his crossed legs to support the weight of the pan. The fire lit the otherwise dark room, the hissing of gaslit flames and the bubbling of the orange liquid went some way to block out the shrieking and the flapping of webbed limbs outside. Winston hovered a few feet away, having learnt his lesson after his desperation for food had once cost him a burnt nose, until the soup was set aside to cool. Will ate his half, not caring that it scalded his tongue but also not wishing the same on the dog. It

was supposedly tomato, though it tasted like bitter water and did not do much to stave off the constant hunger that nagged at the pit of Will's stomach. He sighed, setting a chipped bowl down for Winston and wandering over to the boarded window to peer out through the slats.

The beasts were fighting amongst themselves, no doubt sharing in Will's hunger now that they had all but devoured mankind into extinction. It was too dark to see much, other than a suspended mess of translucent wings and pointed teeth and Will was thankful that their attention was focused on tearing at each other rather that into him. After turning off the stove he didn't dare light a candle or use his wind up torch to see, it could draw the creature's attention and then they would stop at nothing to get to him and his beloved pet. Instead he had mapped the apartment out in his mind, and kept the floors mostly bare so that he could navigate between the main living space, bedroom and bathroom without sight.

He had been used to complete darkness before the monsters took over, living so far out from the city that there wasn't a single streetlight nor any headlights from passing cars to shine through his window. His only neighbours had been the trees and he often thought that perhaps that was how he had lasted so long, practised as he was in isolation. He undressed and climbed into bed, feeling the weight of Winston leaping up beside him. His sleep would be fitful, he had always been burdened by nightmares even before he had to retire in the knowledge that he might wake between the jaws of a demon. He turned towards the furry warmth of his friend and drifted off to the sounds of teeth and claws tearing at thick skin.

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He woke sweating and more exhausted than he had been the night before, Winston was whining beside him, nudging him with his damp nose. He didn't enter the bathroom, he found it hard to remember what it was like to always have running water on hand, it was hard to believe such a luxury had once been so bland a concept. Instead he dressed in dirty clothes, slipping his bent glasses onto the bridge of his nose and looped Winston's lead over the dog's head.

He'd set traps the previous morning, in the woods that lay a quarter of a day's walk away. Winston needed the exercise and the ability to relieve himself somewhere other than the carpeted apartment flooring. There was black blood splattered on road but none of the flaps of grey skin that Winston sometimes relished as though it was beef jerky and not the leathery hide of sewer-dwelling monsters. Will had been afraid of the effect the meat would have on the animal but when he'd survived had decided to cook some up himself. The taste was unlike anything, so vile that he was amazed Winston could stomach it at all. He hadn't tried to consume it again, even when his hunger drove him to briefly consider his only friend as food.

No sound escaped the grates now, the creatures wouldn't risk the painful blistering that the sun inflicted on them, they would be deep within the sewers and no risk to anyone above ground. The pair moved silently, back through the mess of abandoned vehicles and then past rows of houses that became more sparse until finally the forest was in view. The first trap lay untouched, even the wildlife had been driven into hiding by the monsters. The second showed signs of a narrow escape, a tuft of fur caught in the tight snare and finally the third was looped tight around the neck of a white rabbit that had strangled itself in its efforts to

escape. That it was untouched was a miracle, more than half of Will's intended meals were often gobbled down by larger animals, thankful for the opportunity. He cut the soft body free and avoided its distant eyes, there was no room for guilt in the world Will had come to know. He walked on until the sound of rushing water brought him to his much-loved stream. Now that the traps were all down Winston was free to roam, he never wandered far which was especially true today as Will set a small fire and began to skin the rabbit. The pelt made a revolting sound as he tore it from the flesh and muscle but he was used to it now, and moved on to efficiently gut it and impale it on a sharpened stick to roast above the flames.

He turned then to drink and wash himself and his clothing with the passing water. It was only deep enough to submerge his feet, but he managed to cup enough in his hands to splash over his body and do away with the worst of the dried sweat. He had searched for deeper waters, following the stream as far as he could before nightfall, in the hopes of fishing but had had no luck. It was something he was skilled at and he doubted the creatures had managed to deplete the underwater population as they had everywhere else. He stepped back onto dry ground, shrugging into still-damp clothes to turn the rabbit on the spit, the smell of cooked meat had brought Winston back from his wanderings and now he sat drooling a few feet away from the flames. Will smiled, moments like these weren't so bad. Food, water and the clean clothes had put him in a much better mood and he knelt beside his companion, flipping him onto his back to properly lather him with attention.

The dog panted happily beneath him, loudly enough that Will almost missed the sound of a snapping twig from behind a tight row of trees. He pulled his gun immediately, hoping to catch a glimpse of a deer. One particular stag had been elusive enough to escape every one of his attempts so far. When none emerged, he turned back to the rabbit, cooked now, and began stripping the meat from the bones, flicking every other piece to Winston as he ate. With warm food in his stomach he lay back, content to spend another hour in the sun before setting the traps again and heading back home. He must have dozed, because he woke later than expected, the sun in the centre of the sky with Winston nowhere to be seen. He got to his feet quickly, turning wildly and whistling in the hopes that his friend would return to him. What he drew from between the tree trunks was no dog.

“Toss all of your weapons over the stream and get on our knees,” The man demanded, gun raised, “and we won’t harm your dog.”

Will abided, heart rate quickening at his first human contact in years. The man was roughly Will's height, with dark brown hair and beard. If it weren't for the promise of company, Will could probably have disarmed him and sought out Winston himself. However, the thought that someone else was hiding with his dog at their mercy forced Will's hand. He had to comply. Once the gun and collection of knives lay on the other side of the stream, closer to the other man, Will raised his hands and sunk to his knees, visibly shaking. He wished he could appear stronger, more defiant, but the circumstance was overwhelming. To hear a voice, other than those from his nightmares, brought a tightness to his throat and he began to wonder if he could even remember how to reply.

“Good,” The man praised, though his tone was mocking.

He scooped the weapons into his bag and pulled something else out, obscuring it quickly behind his back. Will felt the urge to run, but he had to be brave for Winston. He searched the trees behind the approaching man, frantically looking for a glimpse of muddy, tan fur. The branches behind him rustled and Will turned to see the cause of the noise. It all happened quickly then, a second man stepped out from behind him, gripping his hair and tugging his head aside to expose his neck and before he could even reach up to defend himself the first man had revealed a sharp syringe and pierced the needle deep into his neck. He tugged himself free of them, stumbling to his feet as his vision blurred, still desperately searching for Winston. He whistled once before falling to his knees again, throwing his hands out catch himself before sinking into darkness.

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When he came to it was dark and he felt a distant fear for some threat he couldn't quite place. His limbs felt heavy and it took a moment to realise they were dangling uselessly. He was suspended somehow and felt nauseous. It didn't last long, he hit the ground with enough force to knock the air from his lungs but there was some comfort in feeling the sparse grass between his fingers and knowing he was conscious and that a blindfold was the cause of darkness, not the night.

Screaming erupted around him, the frenzy of the creatures who had finally found him. That didn't fit, Will had seen the monsters hunt, they burnt their prey within seconds of descending on them. Only then did Will recall the men who had taken him, and he recognised the noise surrounding him as the cheers and laughter of humans. The material was tugged roughly from his eyes and he blinked, trying to make sense of the blurry surroundings without his glasses. He was enclosed in a circle of disorderly survivors and immediately he knew that their laughter was at his expense. They hadn't drugged him and then brought him here to join them. He sat up, drawing his knees towards himself and wishing he could see the features of the man before him clearly enough to read his intent. He knew it was the man who had tricked him when he started to speak. The voice was grating and smug.

“Look what I found,” He prodded Will's shoulder much to the amusement of their audience who clapped and cheered louder still.

Will wished he could get to his feet, defend himself from whatever pain they were planning to inflict on him, but he was rooted to the spot. He peered up at the sky, it looked heavy and grey, promising rain, and making it difficult to know the time of day. His attention was drawn back to the man before him as he grabbed his chin and shoved his own face too close. Will didn't look him in the eye, focussing on his pointed nose instead and tried to steady his breathing. The man's chest was puffed out with pride, clearly basking in the approval of those around him.

“Frederick!”

A heavily accented voice in the distance put a stop to the display. The crowd silenced themselves and the man, Frederick, stepped aside to reveal the one that had spoken.

“Who is this?” This was clearly their leader.

He stood tall, not with pride but with authority. His face was blank, almost serene compared to the gleeful savagery of those around him. Frederick didn't answer, stepping back further to allow the leader closer still. Will felt himself shrink back, the man had a chilling presence and in the sudden silence he could hear his own panicked breathing and dreaded how pathetic he must have appeared by comparison.

“Who are you?” The question was directed to Will this time, and he was dragged to his feet by two women he had not heard approach.

They pinned his arms back hard enough that it took all Will had not to whimper and cause himself further humiliation. He felt his mouth open, but no words came out. The man tilted his head, this close Will could make him out more clearly, he had an unusual sort of grace in his features, high cheek bones and thin lips and brown eyes that shone almost maroon at times. He shrank further into the women's grip only to be shoved forward; his arms pinned more tightly. This time he let out a feeble sound and lowered his eyes to the ground. The man placed a hand under his chin then, gentler yet more sinister than Frederick's touch had been, and Will tried to speak again only to find that he had genuinely lost the ability at some point in the past six years.

“I suppose it doesn't matter,” The man said at last, and with those barbed words Will's heart sank.

His fate was clear. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut in preparation, but instead of the cold kiss of a knife or a blow to the head he was merely pushed forward as the crowd began their merriment again. By the time he opened his eyes both Frederick and the more menacing man had disappeared and the crowd had parted. He was marched through them, towards a house that could only be considered a mansion. It was run down, but the windows were boarded, and it looked secure enough that Will at least didn't fear the creatures would get to him. Inside he was discarded in a tiny, windowless room, perhaps a large closet, and the door was shut firmly behind him.

Will listened, in complete darkness once again, and heard a latch slide shut on the other side. He recoiled until his back hit a wall and then he sank down, shaking, and curled in on himself. He desperately wanted Winston at this side then and wondered if the men who took him had even had his dog at all. Either way his only friend's chance of survival looked grim. Either they killed him to eat or the monsters would find him come nightfall. He felt his eyes prick with tears and he silently admonished himself. Should his abductors come back, he would only appear weaker still. He took a deep breath in and tried to mentally prepare himself.

He had survived six years with the beasts, he would survive this too.

Chapter 2

Enough time passed that Will wondered if he had been left there to starve and rot. There were no sounds outside of his prison, not the chatter of humans nor demonic cries. Eventually he accepted that, at least for now, he was only alone with his thoughts and it was better than being dead. Back at the apartment, when the monsters' sounds had kept him from sleep, he would lie in the darkness and think back to the home he'd had in Wolf Trap before the world had fallen apart. It was a modest abode surrounded by long grass and at night resembled a boat afloat a tranquil ocean. The house had been new to him, only having lived there a year. Still, when he thought of home he thought of that house, not of apartment 5C.

The image could only keep him calm for so long though and he began to question whether days had passed or only hours. He was beginning to feel the urge to bang and scratch at the door when it opened, fortunately not giving him a chance to resort to such futile actions. Frederick stood in the doorway, giving Will only a moment to adjust to the light before yanking him to his feet.

"Give me your wrists."

It was then that Will noticed the metal cuffs in his hands. Shaking his head, he thrusts his wrists behind his back and got to his feet so he would be ready to fight if approached. Frederick made a mildly irritated sound and turned to look down the hallway.

"Mason!" He called.

"Oh *goodie*, I love it when they struggle," The man that stepped around him then was odd looking, with blonde hair that jutted in all directions and a smile that was anything but endearing. He surged forward, unaware of Will's police training and was rewarded for his confidence with an elbow to the gut. Will watched him fold over with a grunt before grabbing his shoulders and bringing his knee up between his legs with enough force that the man wheezed and fell to the floor. Will shoved past a baffled Frederick and was halfway down the hall when a tall, broad man stepped out in front of him. He had a scar running from his nose to his mouth that suggested he had been born with a cleft palette. Will tried to ready himself but he had no chance, the man pressed an impossibly strong hand to his neck, nearly lifting him from his feet and flung him to the floor, crushing his ribs beneath his foot.

Frederick was clasping the cuffs on his wrists a second later, looking flustered under the scrutinising gaze of the taller man. He took the embarrassment of his failure out on Will, shoving him roughly through the house until they reached a staircase leading down to what Will could only assume was a basement. Shaking his head frantically he tried to step away but Frederick was prepared for defiance now and having braced himself for such, managed to wrangle Will down the stairs and into a room that was nothing like an ordinary basement and ten times more frightening. The floor and walls consisted of the same grey tile and somehow white light flooded the room. Will scanned the ceiling, wondering how they powered the bulbs, and was distracted enough that Frederick managed to position him against the far wall raising his cuffed hands above his head where a hook and strong chain were hanging. Will

tugged at them but they were sturdy, and a glance to the drain under his feet, and the display of knives and hooks on a table beside him, told him this group were well practised in murder. Perhaps the most daunting detail though was that the leader he had met briefly was stood at the table of blades, sharpening one knife with another. His smile was not sadistic, only mildly content, as if preparing to partake in a benign hobby.

Will took a steadying breath and closed his eyes, trying to grasp the purpose of this room, knowing it went beyond simply killing, the design was too meticulous for it to be just that. He only knew that there had been countless others before him and that more would suffer the same fate after him.

“Thank you, Frederick, that will be all,” The man's voice pulled Will back to the present in time to see Fredericks shoulders slump and as turned to leave.

Disappointment, Will noted. A desire to be seen as equal to the other. Frederick was easy enough to read. It was some relief, at least, that he would not get to enjoy Will's death. He found himself snorting bitterly at the concept of small mercies. This drew the leader's attention back to him, once they were alone the man scanned Will's body as if appraising the cut of a particularly fresh piece of meat. That thought nagged at him, but he couldn't fathom why. He indulged his empathy enough to search the reddish eyes a moment, perturbed when they betrayed nothing. No sadism or cruel intent and certainly no mercy or kindness. The man stepped close, knife still in hand and he braced himself for the cut that didn't come. Instead the man tilted his head again, as if he was entirely confused by Will and placed the knife back on the table next to its counterparts.

“Do you not wish to beg for your life?” He asked, tone nonchalant, almost bored.

Will shrugged, as best he could, he was not too proud to at least bargain for his own survival, but he didn't have the words to do so. They had bubbled from his chest only to become lodged in his throat.

“Open your mouth.”

It was a strange command and Will did not obey. When a hand came up to his nose to pinch it shut, he resisted for perhaps twenty seconds and then relented, his panicked breathing too erratic to have any real control.

“Hmm, so you do have a tongue after all,” The man mused, stepping back, and, if only for a second, Will could see a spark of genuine humour in his eyes.

He ambled over to the table again, his clean shoes tapping a steady rhythm against the tile. Will wondered how anybody had the time or patience to maintain their appearance with the way the world now continuously failed to function. It was not just the perfectly polished brogues but the shirt and patterned vest he wore too. Will imagined that there was probably a matching suit jacket and, although the clothing was worn and faded without the proper means to maintain them, they were in far better condition than anything that Will owned.

The killer picked up a pair of medical shears, apathetic to Wills futile struggle as he approached. He merely used them to slice the material of his t-shirt and let it slide off and

drop to the floor, to be discarded at a more appropriate time. Will felt sweat prickle at the back of his neck and on his brow, even as a chill crept along his spine. The flesh of his abdomen was bare now, ready to be carved with the knives that glinted eagerly beneath buzzing lights. Will thought of the rabbit he had skinned and devoured then, and everything clicked into place. He couldn't help but gasp at the revelation, which caused the man to look up in genuine surprise, he hadn't cut him yet, there was no knife in his hands, in fact he'd even placed the scissors back down and Will noticed a flicker of curiosity run across his otherwise blank expression.

“Are there others where you came from?”

Will shook his head, almost willing him to get on with it now that he was restrained and the knives lay there mockingly reminding him of his near future.

“Honestly?”

Will nodded, with an exasperated sigh that brought a small smile to the man's face.

“Am I boring you? We can move on if you'd like.” He ran his fingers fondly over the handles of the blades before selecting one and raised it for Will to see.

Will felt himself shudder but didn't look away from it, kept his eyes trained on the razor-sharp knife as the man holding it drew nearer. The cold metal blade pressed against his chest but it was held flat, the sharpened edge only a warning to comply for now. Will tensed beneath it, glancing up through his thick lashes at the man's looming face, and swallowing audibly. Happy that the message was received, he pulled the knife away and held it loosely in his hand.

“I'll need to know where you were staying.”

He waited a few moments, not prying his eyes from the quivering yet stubborn young man before him, bound like a sacrificial lamb, blue eyes darting back and forth along the grey walls and avoiding any attempts Hannibal might make to capture his gaze. Will had no qualms sharing his previous location, there really wasn't anyone else there for them to harm. He nodded, hoping the man would understand that he would oblige if he could. He seemed to understand Will's predicament.

“If you'll excuse me for a moment.”

The man placed the knife back on the table and ascended the stairs, leaving Will puzzled and affronted by his use of language, too polite for the circumstance, yet somehow not mocking. He returned only moments later with a sharpened pencil and piece of thick paper, detaching the handcuffs from the chain.

“I'd urge you not to act on impulse,” The man said calmly as he handed the pencil to Will's, still bound, hand. “The pencil is sharp, but my knives are sharper.”

With that he placed a hand to the small of Will's bare back and lead him over to a second table, the surface of this one clear. Will started at the skin contact, but allowed himself to be

led, wondering if he could put his death off long enough that an opportunity to escape may arise. The pencil felt like a promise between unsteady fingers.

“While I was upstairs, Frederick warned me that you are quite the cunning boy. Please don't think yourself able to outsmart me, I'd prefer this stay as civil as possible.”

Civility seemed far out of the question in such a situation, but Will could tell he had no real advantage yet so he nodded and awaited instruction. Trying, and failing, to lift his chin in a show of obstinacy.

“Please write you address on this piece of paper, if you were alone as you implied then there is nothing for you to worry about.”

He placed the paper on the flat surface and waiting patiently as Will composed himself, steadying his shaking hand before scribbling the address and apartment number. It seemed he at least had not forgotten how to write even if his penmanship had suffered for lack of use.

“What is your name?”

Will jotted it down beneath the address. The full title distant to him, after having no one to refer to him as such.

“Thank you, Will.” The man was eerily composed. “My name is Hannibal Lecter.”

Will nodded an acknowledgement, awaiting the instruction to return to his position over the drain, but it didn't come.

“How long have you been alone, Will?”

'Since it started' Will tried to make his writing more intelligible this time. It was a question born of interest and not necessity.

“Could you speak, before?”

Will nodded, uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was taking. If Hannibal expected explanation, there was none he could give.

“How did you survive so long by yourself?” His flat tone of voice had raised in pitch just enough to betray his curiosity. Will had to shrug in response, he'd simply survived because there was no other choice.

“I do wish we could have a more two-sided conversation,” Hannibal sighed, an act of being put upon, “What did you do before this?”

'I taught classes on criminal profiling'. It was more than he would like to have shared but hopefully enough to keep him alive a little longer. He felt the man shift beside him.

“For how long?”

'Only a year' the tip of the pencil was becoming blunt and Will wished he had pushed more gently, his potential weapon becoming less lethal with every reply.

There was a long pause then, Will watching Hannibal from the corner of his eyes, his grip on the pencil tightening as the seconds ticked by. Finally, Hannibal spoke.

“I'm not going to kill you.” He stated, matter of factly, unrolling the sleeves of his shirt and smoothing them down.

Will swallowed, unsure of what he'd done to earn the right to his life. It was his turn to ask the question now.

'Why?' He scribbled, his hand shaking even more than before.

He was not naïve enough to believe he'd be released now; he could have escaped death only to suffer a fate far worse. The depths of human depravity had no boundaries in a world without law or societal standards.

He looked up at the man for his reply, but he only smiled, a false thing that failed to reach his eyes.

Once locked back in the dark room, Will realised he hadn't gotten a chance to find out what time of day it was. Escape would be impossible after nightfall but there was no way to keep track from within his little prison. He curled up on the hard wood floor, resting his head on his arm to see what his body clock had to say on the matter but the adrenaline, still pumping through his system after his time in the basement, kept him awake and dreadfully bored. Eventually he resorted to picking at the scabs he'd accumulated over time.

As if on cue, the latch groaned, and the door slipped open. Will shielded his eyes from the harsh lighting of the hall until his pupils had restricted enough that he could see Hannibal clearly, stood in the doorway with a bowl of something steamy.

He stayed there a second before asking “May I come in?”

Will couldn't help but offer a grim smile in reply. It was a sick use of manners, his place in the man's eyes was clear, and it wasn't as an equal. He nodded regardless, willing to play along with the falsities so long as it helped towards his eventual escape. Hannibal took one step in and knelt, placing the bowl by Will's feet.

“I thought you might be hungry.”

Will licked his lips, the bowl contained a stew of some sort and it smelt divine, a mix of meat, vegetables and herbs. Will hadn't had enough ingredients to combine much of anything and what may have once been thought of as a simple, wholesome meal now teased his nostrils like a delicacy. Hannibal slid the piece of paper and pencil towards him and he was about to write his thanks when he remembered the revelation the basement had provided.

'What is it?' He wrote instead.

Hannibal's lips tightened in displeasure, “A stew.”

'What kind of meat is it?' Will clarified, sliding the paper towards him and watching the quick conflict of emotion on the man's face before he composed himself and met Will's eyes before he could look away.

Something there must have told him that Will already knew for he answered honestly.

“Human. Though only barely.”

Will nodded slowly, sliding the bowl back towards Hannibal, trying to ignore the acidic taste in his mouth that threatened to expel what was left of the rabbit from his body. Hannibal didn't take the bowl back, he simply got to his feet and left, locking the door behind him so that Will's senses were shut off once again. All accept smell. His stomach gurgled but he ignored the sensation. He had managed more than a week without a bite to eat in the past. Whatever sick method of torment this was, he'd survive it like he survived everything else.

Chapter 3

It was impossible to tell how many days had passed when submerged in constant darkness. At first, Will had tried to measure time by the delivery of meals that he left uneaten in the furthest corner of the room, but then a bowl would arrive after what felt like only an hour since the previous one had been removed. Other times it felt like entire days passed with no offering. Eventually Will suspected that the erratic feedings were a deliberate attempt to unease him, that or he was losing time along with his mind. The walls seemed to be always closing in on him, to the point that Will would sometimes huddle in the centre of the tiny space, waiting for his prison to implode. He slept upright, in the furthest corner from the door and when he awoke, it was always covered in a film of sweat, which built layer upon layer after each nightmare with no way to wash in his confined space. For a toilet he had a plastic bucket and like with the food, he wondered if his captors sometimes took deliberately long intervals between emptying it just to add to his agitation. Soon there wasn't much use for it though, as his body had nothing left to excrete.

Will curled his bare toes where he sat in the corner, rolling stiff heavy shoulders back and wondering whether a kinder fate awaited him outside with the beasts. His shoes and socks had been left beside the stream, his shirt never replaced, and with hunger came a biting chill that penetrated his bones. Every inch of him screamed out for sustenance but he lay his head against the wall and tried to drift, hoping that perhaps, one day soon, he'd fail to wake and the ordeal would be over. He must have slept some, for the door was open where it had been closed only a second prior and Will was squeezing his eyes shut against the piercing glow.

Hannibal made no comment on the rancid, sickly state of his captive, only placing the bowl down at his feet as he always did, with a small smile that failed to reach his eyes. Will knew that he resembled a trapped rodent, blinded and quivering against the back wall, and ducked his head, matted hair falling across his hooded eyes. The rich smell of onions and tomatoes wafted amongst the steam rising from the bowl, along with the more disturbing scent of cooked flesh. Despite himself he peered over at the stew in time to see a delicious mixture of fresh ingredients in a thick gravy that beckoned him closer regardless of the knowledge that it contained thick chunks of long-pig.

The door shut, the darkness returned, and the smell engulfed him causing his stomach to lurch painfully. He crawled towards it, only to reach for the offered water canteen beside the dish, but his fingers brushed against the warm, welcoming china bowl and he let his hand rest there, savouring the heat. Just for the heat, he told himself, and only until the stiff sting in his fingers had subsided. He knew that it could take as long as sixty days to starve to death, far quicker if he refused the water too, however it was the only balm to splitting headaches and a vacant stomach, and his goal was to survive and escape, not wilt away to nothing. Eventually, he supposed, it would be easy enough for his captors to force the flesh down his throat, and since they wouldn't lock themselves in with him, such attempts could be an opportunity to slip out of their grip and get away.

Scooping the bowl up into his lap, he enveloped it, trying to draw in any warmth that he could. The steam rose up to caress his face and he couldn’t help but lean a little closer. Then

again, he thought, they might just wait for him to die and eat what was left of him. In that case, he'd need to gain their trust if he ever hoped to be given enough leverage to get away.

Screwing his face up in disgust, he set the bowl down again with enough force to send some of the liquid spilling over the sides. He dragged himself backwards until he hit the wall, taking the water with him in an attempt to dull the empty ache that never really left him now. For a moment he had almost considered cannibalism excusable, if it resulted in his freedom. He flung his head back hard against the wall, his thoughts were jumbled and fuzzy and he felt his morality slipping away with every second he spent confined. Will had underestimated the innate need to eat, and how that drive would threaten to override his defiance. He finished the water, wishing there was enough to at least wash the grime from his face but not wanting to waste any. The fluid swished in his empty stomach, filling it physically but the nausea was still there. He closed his eyes, breathing through his mouth as not to be tempted by the smell of the food, and tried to escape to a slightly more pleasant time.

He threw a stick for Winston, the two of them splashing recklessly through the stream. The sun was still low in the east so there was no looming threat of nightfall. Sometimes Will would laugh out loud on those days. It was one of the only sounds he really made and only Winston could elicit it, with the oblivious foolery that dogs seemed to possess. The mutt lunged after the falling twig with purpose, only to trip on a rock beneath the water’s surface and drench himself. He recovered his footing and began bobbing for it, almost with an air of frustration as the stick eluded him again and again. Will climbed onto the dry grass, leaving his friend to battle against the water that carried his prize away, and lay out in the sun to dry off. The golden orb offered more than warmth and sight now, it was the only form of protection that truly mattered.

The splashing stopped, and Will's eyes flickered open. Winston seemed to have given up on the stick and the stream altogether. Propping himself up on his elbows, Will whistled, but there were no answering footfalls or rustle from the bushes. He whistled again and was met with more silence still. He got to his feet as he scanned the woods around him. The sight of the shadows between thick tree trunks and branches stirred a sense of anxiety within him that he couldn't explain. He whistled once more in vain and then started for the trees, lingering momentarily at the edge of the small clearing before pushing himself forward. The trees seemed skewed, the branches far more twisted than he remembered them being and he found himself fighting through the thickness of the forest. In all the time he'd travelled the familiar route through the trees, he'd left small trails for himself in the ground. The grass was disturbed enough to notice if you were really looking. Now though, it all seemed unfamiliar, and his feet were silent against the ground, even as he picked up pace and stepped heavily with the intent to make some form of noise that might draw Winston to him. He tried to whistle again but the air passed through his lips without a sound, and as he peered up through the branches, he noticed the sky growing grey and then dark grey and then…

Before he could be blanketed in complete darkness, some movement to his left captured his attention, and he span on his heel to find thick tendrils of smoke no, steam, making their way through the branches and towards him. Deep inside himself some half-buried instinct told him to run, but he stayed still, as if rooted to the earth beneath his feet, and allowed the

warmth to wrap around him. He sighed contentedly, it smelt divine and lulled him into forgetting whatever fear had been bubbling beneath the surface. He sank to his knees and smiled as it engulfed him.

He'd fallen asleep amongst the memory, he realised upon waking with a full bladder, and got to his feet, his cramped muscles aching in protest, to stumble towards the bucket when his foot knocked something. The bowl. It didn't spill, just wobbled slightly and resettled. He sank beside it, just to check, he told himself, and dipped his fingers into the stew which had now cooled. His stomach pleaded with him anyway, flipping as if in anticipation and Will found himself prodding the floating meat and vegetables, his urgent need to urinate suddenly forgotten.

In his pitch-black prison, he couldn't see the food, and it seemed almost inoffensive in a way. Just a dish of much needed nourishment going to waste. He brought a coated finger to his mouth, biting at his lips as he contemplated briefly, before poking out his tongue to taste it. He let out a moan, startling himself with the noise enough to send him tumbling backwards. He could have laughed at himself then, perhaps it was the kind of giddiness that came with a lack of brain fuel, but instead he shuffled forward, still seated and dipped his hands back into the bowl before he could truly consider his actions.

This time he scooped, definite chunks amongst the gravy, and his fingers came out dripping down to the knuckle. The first taste had been overwhelming, the perfect blend of herbs and the tang of onions in the sauce had awoken his well-rested digestive system and now he was ravenous to the point that he didn't register that the taste of beef between his teeth was not beef at all. Will grabbed the bowl in shaking hands and tipped it up towards his face, not minding the lukewarm liquid that dripped from his chin onto his bare feet beneath him. He gulped and chewed and didn't stop until he'd licked the bowl clean and his stomach felt stretched and distended inside of him.

He scurried back to his corner then, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth and heard the manic giggles before realising he was making the disturbing sound. He quietened himself, wrapping his arms around his bent knees and rocking slightly, knowing he'd done something terrible but feeling too satiated to dwell on it. He might have fallen back to sleep then, the strain on his gut almost forcefully shutting the rest of his body down. But now his stomach flipped in a way that didn't signify hunger and acid stung the back of his tongue. He jerked upright and just managed to tip his head over the bucket before the vomit spewed forth in a chunky, frothy mess. Tears ran and dripped from his top lip as he gagged, his frail body continuing to heave even when there was nothing left to expel.

Once the sickness had passed, and he was ruing the fact that he had no water left to swill the taste of his stomach from his mouth, Will curled into a ball on his side, trying not to mind the way his protruding hip bones dug into the hard floor, and managed to fall asleep.

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“Will?”

He woke to the sound of his name, vaguely aware of the burning sensation at the back of his throat. Light was pouring in from the open door and some part of his subconsciousness was screaming at him to shove the obstacle from his path and run but his body felt heavy and his limbs seemed useless as he stirred. Squinting upwards, he saw Hannibal crouched over him and tried to wriggle back only to find the wall, a sturdy barrier behind him.

“I'm glad you saw sense, Will.” He spoke in a way that feigned concern, though his eyes were blank and unreadable. “Your disregard for your body's needs seems to have proved a problem though, I see you were unable to keep any of it down.”

He tutted, as if Will's refusal to eat had been nothing more than the hunger strike of a grounded teenager, making a half-attempt at rebellion. Will only blinked, unable to reply without the paper or pencil that Hannibal had provided him with in the past.

“Sit up for me please,” He ordered, not giving Will the chance to refuse as he pulled him upwards and propped him against the wall with a surprising show of strength. He placed a palm against his forehead, and this time Will yanked away from his touch, only to feel the other hand clamp around the back of his neck to hold him in place.

“No fever, good.”

Hannibal looked over his shoulder at the bucket and then back to Will with a smile that almost conveyed pride.

“Later I will provide something a little more palatable,” He stated, getting to his feet and turning to leave.

Despite himself, Will let out a panicked yelp at the thought of being left alone again.

Hannibal turned, one eyebrow raised, before schooling his expression to one of disinterest.

Will mimed writing, in the hope that he would be given the chance to ask Hannibal what the purpose of his confinement was, but the man only shook his head with a small smile.

“No, dear Will.”

Will shuddered inwardly at the incongruous use of affection.

“You need to rest now.”

Frederick was called and Will’s bucket was taken to be emptied which cleared the air of the it's pungent smell, but the door was shut and the blackness and silence began to pick away at Will's mind again, like vultures pecking at a corpse. The reality of what he'd done set in then. He'd eaten human flesh, devoured it like a gluttonous beast. Not only that but he'd found the taste to be exquisite. He wrapped his arms around his bare chest to comfort himself. It had been the only option, he'd never escape without the strength to do so and the food would have

only gone to waste or been eaten by another anyway. Will chastised himself, aware that he was only making excuses to absolve himself of the guilt he deserved to be feeling. He began to rock then, Hannibal had said he'd return with more food, and the thought petrified him. He wondered if he was going to be kept in the dismal little room, gnawing on his captor's victims for the rest of his life.

He was already filthy, half mad and covered in sores and abrasions from sleeping on the hard floor while so thin and sickly. If he too, continued to survive via cannibalism then he may as well have been one of the monsters lurking in the sewers. A sudden wetness bothered the hairs on Will's arm and he realised he was crying. There was no use in pretending to be strong anymore, not while no one was there to take notice of his not-so-valiant effort.

Chapter 4

“Hello again Will, how are you?”

Will glared up through his lashes as he scribbled his reply.

‘Great, five-star accommodation, thanks for asking.'

He tossed the paper back towards the man who stood in the doorway with a bowl in his hands. Hannibal tutted as he scooped the paper up from the ground.

“I don't tolerate rudeness, Will.” He stated firmly, stepping closer to loom over him and ignoring the way Will flinched as the paper was passed back to him. “I came here to see how I can make you more comfortable.”

Will had to refrain from snorting in reply. He was sure it had been at least an entire day since Hannibal had left with the promise of more food. Will had been doomed to remain in the darkness and contemplate what he'd done, how he'd obeyed his captors in eating what they provided. The last thing Hannibal could possibly be concerned with was Will's comfort. Hannibal took a step back and raised an eyebrow expectantly. Will could only just make out what he was writing by the glow that streamed in around his captor’s silhouette.

'Some light would be nice.’

This time he held the paper up for Hannibal to see, not wanting to evoke any unnecessary anger. So far, he had acted eerily calm, but the threat of what he was prepared to do to him hung heavy in the air between them.

“Of course,” He replied, taking a further step back and reaching out around the door frame.

Will watched him curiously; squinting when a switch was flicked, and a previously unnoticed bulb buzzed to life above his head. He all but bit through his tongue in anger. It had been that simple, all this time he'd been driven mad by the darkness as some form of depraved torture. He inhaled deeply to calm himself, Hannibal's mild amusement not helping at all. His expression seemed to suggest that all Will had had to do was ask, when he knew perfectly well that it couldn't be done without the aid of the paper or pencil.

“Anything else?”

Will wondered what he actually had the right to request. Pushing the boundaries too far could result in having the light taken from him, something he couldn't bear to imagine now that he could finally see the dull walls of his prison.

“Perhaps some blankets?” Hannibal's suggested, pulling him from his thoughts.

Will hesitated, trying to gauge his sincerity, before nodding slowly. The promise of any form of warmth was beyond enticing.

“Then eat this please,” Hannibal handed the bowl to Will who accepted it quickly. The implication was clear. If he did as he was told, he could keep such privileges.

To his relief, it was some sort of vegetable soup. Too watery to hide any form of meat.

“After neglecting your body for so long, you won't be able to keep anything more solid down for quite some time.” Hannibal explained, perhaps picking up on Will's initial reluctance. “But soon you'll be fine to have something more substantial.” It was a threat; this reprieve was only temporary.

Will pinned the spoon aside to lift the dish to his face instead, ravenous since emptying his stomach the day before.

“Slowly,” Hannibal warned, smiling slightly as Will jumped at the sound of his voice and then lowered the bowl, taking the offered spoon to sip as he had been told. “Good.”

He felt his hackles rise at the praise but continued to eat anyway, savouring each mouthful until his bowl was empty and his body silently begged him for more. He wouldn't ask.

“Now,” Hannibal spoke from the doorway, having watched him eating intently the entire time. “I apologise, but I think a wash is long overdue.”

Will allowed him to fasten the cuffs at his wrists then, the promise of soapy water far outweighing the humiliation of the act. He was led through the halls, ducking his head each time someone passed, until they came to a familiar door. The entrance to the basement.

Tensing, Will shook his head, trying to take a step back only to crash into Hannibal and then flinch away.

“I suspect you are far too intelligent to trust me Will,” Hannibal spoke as he twisted the door handle, “so I can only offer you an ultimatum.”

He swung the door open and signalled for Will, who was still hesitating at his side, to go first.

“Either you enter the basement, where you will be washed, or I return you to your room in your current state and switch off the light.”

Will swallowed. He hated the idea of *being washed* almost as much as the thought of returning to the darkness. He took a deep breath and nodded, not meeting Hannibal's eyes but watching the corners of his lips turn up in a triumphant smile that made his skin crawl. And so, he stepped through the door, goosebumps spreading across the back of his neck as he sensed Hannibal's silent presence behind him on the stairs. The knives had been tidied away since his last visit, but the fixture and chain dangling from the roof remained and Will eyed it cautiously. Heavy footsteps drew his attention to Frederick, who was making his way clumsily towards them, burdened with two heavy buckets of steaming water. He huffed as he set them down, clearly finding the task irksome.

“Thank you, Frederick,” Hannibal murmured.

It was a dismissal, Hannibal turning to face the tense captive before him,

“Will, if you will.” Hannibal motioned towards the chain hanging above the drain and raised an eyebrow as if daring him to refuse.

Grinding his teeth together, aware that there really wasn't another option, he made his way slowly towards it. He might have argued if he could, insisted he could wash himself but, even if he *could* speak, he knew his protests would have been met with refusal and possibly force. Hannibal fixed his bound wrists above his head, humming approvingly at Will's compliance. His toes curled against the cold metal grate beneath him and he tugged without any real effort at the chain above him, if only to be clear that he wasn't so meek as he might appear.

“Eventually, I would like to cultivate some trust between us,” Hannibal began, slipping a small pair of medical shears from his inner jacket pocket, “but for now I think you know this is entirely necessary.”

He motioned briefly with his free hand to the chain and cuffs, stepping forward and crouching to snip at the hems of his jeans. Will's foot twitched, not from the proximity of the sharp blades to his skin but with the urge to kick the man away from him. He resisted, knowing that his wrists would still be bound and he'd then be at the mercy of a very angry cannibal. Once the thick stitching at the bottom of his trouser legs was cut, the shears sliced through the denim baring his legs in two swift motions, and slipping dangerously close to the soft bulge beneath his briefs. Will inhaled sharply, but the blades were gone as quickly as they'd arrived there, and no damage had been done. Relieved as he was to be intact, he didn't notice Hannibal make a move with the shears towards his boxer briefs until he was merely inches away. He pushed his hips backwards, narrowly avoiding the indignity. Tightening his lips, Hannibal straightened and studied Will with a look of detached contemplation. Will felt himself shudder under his gaze, wishing he could free his arms to cover himself.

“I used to be a doctor, before all of this,” he stepped closer to Will who was still leaning as far back as his restraints would allow. “I assure you this is only an impartial act in the interest of your own personal hygiene.”

It was all the reassurance Will would get. The man stepped closer still and sliced the material along his hips, away from his more vulnerable anatomy, and bared Will entirely in seconds. The bound man huffed indignantly, crimson rising across his cheeks and chest to be so exposed and vulnerable. Hannibal returned the shears to his jacket and retrieved a sodden wash cloth from one of the buckets, wringing it of excess water, before pressing it to Will's chest. Some of his tension evaporated, along with the steam from the buckets, as the warmth settled there. Feeling entirely betrayed by his body, Will took a step back and tugged at the chain once more. Hannibal shushed him, as if he were a startled animal, which only caused the redness to spread further in embarrassment.

“The less you struggle, the faster this will be over. The sooner you will be dressed and returned to your room.” Hannibal spoke as he dunked the cloth, not wringing it as tightly this time, so that the water trickled down from it as he pressed it at the side of Will's neck.

The droplets followed the path of his sculpted chest and abdomen, the result of a strenuous existence and no fat to cover it. His strength was compact, but not wiry. Indeed, he was underfed and malnourished but as the grime fell away with the water the body beneath it revealed itself to be quite beautiful. Hannibal absently mused at his own attraction to the wild

thing tied before him while maintaining a look of professional neutrality. He wanted the man to trust and depend on him, that couldn't be done if he startled him with his own want so soon.

Once Will had stopped responding so adversely to the touch against his bare skin, Hannibal started to wash him more quickly, wiping down his chest and stomach first, then scrubbing his arms from his wrists down to his pits. When finished there, Hannibal brought the soaked cloth with him to stand behind Will, who stiffened and tried to peer over his shoulder at him. He'd been as considerate as a captor could be in such an act, but still, Will felt jeopardized with the man so close yet out of his line of vision. The cloth was placed and squeezed between his shoulder blades, and despite the heat Will shivered as the water ran down his spine and between the two pert cheeks below. The water smelt of mint leaves and lye, which would have been a pleasant change from the earthy water of the stream under different circumstances.

Soon Will's neck ached from the strain of attempting to watch Hannibal at such an angle, so he let his head drop forward instead, scrunching his eyes shut and willing him to hurry up and get on with it. The man moved so silently that the only indication he had moved at all was the sound of water being wrung from the cloth into the bucket below. Will opened his eyes again and watched him approach and reach towards his genitals. At this attempt, he all but leapt back, feeling the cuffs dig into his wrists. He brought a knee up to protect himself and shook his head, silently imploring that he be spared that humiliation at least.

“The ultimatum still stands, Will.” Hannibal stood, seemingly patient, as if there was nothing else to do and allowed Will to consider his options.

Will shook his head again, legs still raised to protect his dignity, if he had any left at this point.

“So you'd like to return to your room, with no light, or blankets for warmth?” Hannibal asked passively, the cloth dripping in his hands.

Will shook his head a third time, eyes stinging with the injustice of it all. Slowly, with a sigh of resignation, he lowered his leg and shut his eyes again, grimacing when the cloth made contact. The washing itself was swift and inoffensive, it was the fact that he had surrendered himself that made him shudder long after the cloth was removed and Hannibal went about washing his legs and feet. Finally, his captor lifted the second bucket, with alarming ease, and poured it over the planes of his naked body. Now the warmth was pleasant again, the sensation of it almost washing Will of his shame as well as any remaining sweat and dirt.

To Will's surprise he was unbound then, if only long enough to slip his arms into the afforded towelling robe and tie it tightly around himself. Hannibal offered him a small smile of approval and Will dropped his eyes to the floor, allowing his hands to be cuffed again in the knowledge that the ordeal was over. It had subdued him somewhat, the comfort in being clean and the contempt at *being cleaned,* and somehow the thought of the light and warmth that awaited him brought him genuine appeasement. Still, he was not so compliant that he would cease his escape attempts, and as he was led back to the tiny room, the halls now becoming more familiar to him, he studied the boarded windows. Light shone through the cracks between the nailed wood, it was daytime. That knowledge alone was a small victory.

The house was loud with activity. Somewhere nearby, pots and pans were clinking together and the mumble of laughter and conversation filled most of the rooms they passed. Will was perturbed that so many people could support the hunting of human beings. It was worryingly domestic. Food was scarce, Will knew that from his own harrowing experiences, but still, cannibalism seemed too warped and vile for people, once civilised, to resort to. Hannibal noticed his attention to the windows.

“Perhaps, if you don't make this more arduous than it needs be, I can permit you time outdoors.” He suggested, hastening him forward when he dawdled there too long.

The offer ignited a small spark of hope in Will. While studying the minds of nefarious criminals he had read several cases in which a victim had gained their captors trust enough to be afforded the opportunity to escape. They'd appealed to the nature of the monsters who kept them, found out what exactly they wanted from them and given them just that. It would mean even more cooperation on Will's part, and his stomach turned just imagining the food he'd have to eat to keep Hannibal happy. First, he'd have to determine what initially stayed his hand in killing him, and then take advantage of it. It would be a difficult task but still he was giddy with the thought of his freedom as he turned the corner to his prison cell.

“I trust this is more to your liking?”

A bed roll took up the entire length, and one third of the width, of the small room. It looked plump and comfortable and Will felt his muscles uncoil with the knowledge that he'd not have to sleep against the hard, wooden floor again. At the foot of it, there was a small pile of fleece blankets, navy blue like the bed roll. The light was still on, as promised for his obedience, and a small assortment of clothing was placed at the opposite side of the room. He didn't smile, only nodded, though the relief he felt was palpable. He turned towards Hannibal to have his cuffs removed, and then allowed himself to be shut in, his throat tightening as he waited for the light to switch off, a trick after all. But it remained on and so he chose some clothes and settled on the bedroll.

He patted himself dry with the robe before slipping into a white dress shirt and black slacks, too big at the waist but with no belt to adjust them. The clothing was entirely inappropriate for his position as an unwilling guest, but it felt protective and in stark comparison to the nakedness he'd endured moments before. Woollen socks hugged his feet, that until that point had been achingly cold, and he pulled one of the blankets around his shoulders and leant back against the wall with the plump bedroll beneath him.

At least now he could maintain his sanity long enough to form an escape plan.

Chapter 5

“Face the wall and put your hands behind your back.”

It was the same frighteningly tall man that had intercepted his escape in the hallway days before.

Will hesitated for a moment, anxiety spreading through him like lice beneath his skin, before getting to his feet and doing as asked. Large steps closed the space between them and his hands were cuffed, unnecessarily tight, so that he could be led out into the hall. His heart rate sped up as they approached the door to the basement, only to hammer faster still when they passed it and ventured into the uncharted territory of the second floor. It was as much a maze as the first, and Will felt entirely turned around by the time they stopped outside of a beautifully carved mahogany door. Tinny music floated through the barrier and Will felt himself ache with nostalgia at the sound. It was unfamiliar, both the tune and the instrument that performed it, but to hear any music at all after so many years caused a longing ache in his chest. The man knocked on the door and the music stopped abruptly.

“Come in,” The voice beyond belonged to Hannibal, his accent unmistakable.

The man obeyed, pushing Will in before him, hard enough that he stumbled and had to be caught by his wrists. He winced but steadied himself as Hannibal turned from the piano-like instrument he had been playing.

“Thank you, Francis, that will be all.”

Without so much as a submissive nod, Francis turned to leave, and Will briefly wondered how much control Hannibal really had over his followers. There was tension there, an unwillingness to be ordered about.

“Will, take a seat please.” He motioned to a desk, art-deco in style, against the left wall.

A pencil and sheet of lined paper were already awaiting him there. With a quick glance around, he obliged and sat on the soft stool, his hands still bound tightly at his back. The room was opulent, unlike anything Will had seen before. The walls were dark panelled wood, adorned with framed paintings, some of which Will recognised, others he didn't. The king-sized bed was made with white, silk pillows and sheets and a prussian blue bed runner that matched the sloping ceiling and the velvet banquette at the foot of it.

“Did you sleep well?” Hannibal asked, getting to his feet to free him of the cuffs with a quick warning look.

Will nodded, in truth he had, the bed roll had felt heavenly after sleeping so long against the hard floor and he'd been pleasantly warm beneath the blankets that he'd been provided.

“Good,” Hannibal tapped the paper in front of Will, waiting for him to rub his sore wrists before picking up the pencil. “I thought we might speak.”

Will shrugged, trying to relax but feeling entirely vulnerable in the new surroundings.

“I sent people to the address you gave me,” He started, sitting on the banquette just behind Will, “thank you for your honesty, it has been noted.”

Again, Will shrugged. There wasn't much he could have offered in reply. Hannibal sat a little straighter, smoothing the lapels of his linen jacket.

“They found a dog.”

Will's ears pricked at that and he span to face the man behind him who smiled with the knowledge that he'd finally captured his full attention.

“You know this dog?” He asked, his nonchalance feigned. Will was sure Frederick had told him about Winston already, but he didn't ruffle at the teasing or the patronising tone of voice. He wanted desperately to know that his friend was safe. He turned back to the paper and scribbled his reply hastily, holding it out for Hannibal to see.

'Yes, he's mine. His name is Winston.'

“Ah, it's a good thing he's so elusive then,” Hannibal smiled but his eyes remained blank, “had my men caught him they may have made a meal of him.”

'Will they go back for him?'

He held out the paper, this time in shaking hands and swallowed the lump that had risen in his throat, thanking the gods that Winston had escaped them.

“No,” Hannibal shifted so he was seated more comfortably, obviously anticipating a longer conversation than Will would have liked. “They had to spend the night, there is a nest just outside the apartment building. I doubt they'll ever be willing to return.”

Will nodded, happy that for once the beasts’ presence served a purpose. Winston was smart enough to avoid them, to be in by nightfall. Will was glad he'd found his way home but at the same time the thought that he'd go hungry gnawed at him. He was resentful enough for being taken and treated this way, without the knowledge that the only friend he had in the world was likely withering away without him.

There was a long moment of silence between them, Hannibal clearly waiting for Will to initiate the next line of conversation. He sucked his bottom lip in between his teeth, the man was so difficult to read. Talking with him was like teetering on the edge of a ravine, unsure which step would cause the rocks to crumble at his feet and send him hurtling into the crater below. Eventually he plucked up the courage, declining to engage would get him nowhere after all.

'Will you tell me why you chose not to kill me?' He held the paper up to be seen, anticipating refusal or possibly anger but Hannibal remained placid.

“I find you interesting.” He sounded as surprised by this confession as Will was to hear it.

'Why?'

“If I were you, I'd try not to delve too deeply into the logic behind it. You're alive, are you not?” He leant forward, uncrossing his legs, and offered a seemingly genuine smile.

'For how long?' Will could feel his frustration building, threatening to ruin the illusion of trust he had promised himself he would build with his captor.

“That depends on you, Will,” As if he had been afforded some special privilege and not simply the temporary right to live.

The implication, as always, was more than clear. If he behaved, and remained *interesting*, he would survive. But Hannibal was giving nothing away. Another long moment of silence stretched between them, Hannibal allowing his message to sink in.

“How did you pass your time Will, when you were alone?” He got to his feet and wandered over to a small, ornate, bookcase that Will hadn't seen upon first entering the room. He couldn't make out the titles on the spines of the books without his glasses. Hannibal turned to see him squinting and smiled, something sparking behind his eyes.

“Perhaps,” He began, trailing his fingers along the bindings, “I could recover your glasses for you, if you agree to speak honestly with me. Quid pro quo.” He added, pulling a white and blue hardcover from the shelf and returning to the banquette.

Will would need his sight. It was a step in the right direction at least. He nodded and began to write.

'I was busy. I needed to set traps and scavenge for food. I washed myself and my clothes in the stream where your men found me, getting there and back took up a large part of the day.'

It took noticeably longer to write than to speak and Will felt a newfound frustration at his inability to do so. It hadn't hindered him until now, Winston simply responding to sharp whistles and signals, so much so that at first he hadn't realized he'd lost the ability at all.

Hannibal nodded thoughtfully.

“Your survival kept you busy,” He tapped his fingernails across the cover of the book in his lap, “I imagine you find yourself quite bored now, nothing to occupy your time.”

Will huffed a half-laugh. The corners of Hannibal's lips twitched upwards at the sound and Will despised him for it.

“A book perhaps, to sate your mind.” He got to his feet and placed the book on the desk beside the paper. Will kept his breath steady, trying not to duck away from the man's proximity.

He could read the title now that it was close, 'The Wind Up Bird Chronicle', he ran his fingers over the illustration of the little mechanical creature on the cover, feeling Hannibal's eyes studying him from behind. It would be a relief, to have something to do with himself, to keep his mind from wandering to the more distressing scenarios that played over and over in his

head. He didn't want this privilege taken from him so, aware of his captor’s inclination towards good manners, he wrote two words on the paper and passed it to him.

'Thank you.'

“You're welcome Will,” He seemed pleased by his captive's gratitude as he handed the paper back to him. “I truly don't wish for you to suffer, though it may seem difficult for you to believe right now.”

Will didn't write a reply, he'd be amiable, even if he didn't believe a word the man said. In the past, he'd been able to tell whether people were lying to him. He had a knack for reading them. Perhaps it was from lack of practice, but Will couldn't gather anything from the blank eyes that looked back at him, almost through him, now. There was a knock at the door then, loud enough to send Will to his feet and to the corner of Hannibal's room, his heart racing, unused as he was to loud noises during the day. Hannibal's head whipped to follow his movement, eyes resting on Will's shaking form, taking in the wringing of nervous hands, but once he'd determined that it was out of fear and not an attempt to evade him, he seemed to forgive him and moved quietly to answer the door.

Will couldn't see who it was or hear what they had to say, but soon Hannibal turned, closing the door behind him, with a bowl of something steaming in his hands. He calmed himself, peering into the bowl warily and relaxing once he noticed the familiar vegetable broth. His stomach made a strained, begging noise and Hannibal smiled, placing the bowl on the desk.

“Please sit and eat Will,” He stood, waiting as Will brought himself over and sat inches from him, taking up the pencil first to write his thanks before, slowly as he had been warned before, he started to sip at the hot soup.

Hannibal sat at his instrument and resumed his playing, and Will allowed himself, just for the moment, to sink into the enjoyment of warm food and music. It wasn't so claustrophobic in Hannibal's room, far larger than his own and far more comfortable than the basement. He was surprised he was allowed to exist in such a personal space at all. As if reading his thoughts Hannibal turned to speak over the melancholy tune he was playing with ease. Not faltering for lack of attention to it.

“Would you like to spend the mornings here with me?”

Will put down his spoon, and gave the appearance of contemplation for a minute, as not to seem too eager to wile away the mornings with the man who had deigned to keep him like an animal, before nodding. If it was simply company he wanted, Will could oblige, and gaining his trust may be easier than he had first thought. Hannibal returned his attention fully to his music, his fingers dancing lithely across the keys, to perform another song that Will did not recognise. He enjoyed it none the less for its foreignness though, closing his eyes once he'd finished eating, so that he could imagine he was listening to it elsewhere, perhaps in his apartment or in headphones at the stream with Winston splayed across his lap. Will was fortunate that he'd always had a rather vivid imagination. If he allowed himself, he could sink almost entirely into the pleasant daydream with only hints of fear and frustration carried on the silvery notes in the background. It caused his heart to ache more fiercely for his loyal

friend though, wondering if he'd still be there waiting when he finally returned. He'd need to gain the man's trust quickly.

'What type of instrument is that?'

He lifted the paper for Hannibal to read once he had finished playing.

“It's a harpsichord. I prefer the sound and feel of it to a piano. It's alive, the music arrives sudden and entire.” He played a harsh D chord as if the demonstrate. “Do you like it?” Will scribbled quickly, nodding as he held out his paper.

'It's the first music I've heard since the power went out.'

He looked up at the soft glow of the ceiling light then, brows furrowed, and Hannibal did not make him ask for an explanation in writing.

“Solar panels” He motioned to the roof above them, “provide power most of the year.”

Will gazed up at the bulb again, then back at the man seated at the harpsichord. Perhaps the promise of warmth and light had compelled the people there to stay and partake in the barbaric consumption of human flesh. Still, it wasn't quite reason enough.

“Tell me, Will, what did you use instead?”

'A butane cooker or I built a fire if I was outside'

“And for light?”

Will trembled at the memory of the demon's scraping at his windows, the flames from their mouths causing the glass to shatter and curling around the wooden slats there until only ashes remained.

'They would have discovered me if I'd had light' He didn't have to explain who 'they' were, Hannibal knew well enough. He nodded to show as much.

“The terrors you must have witnessed,” He spoke with a hint of wonder in his voice, not sympathy or even pity.

Will felt his skin crawl under the man's scrutiny, blank eyes scanning his entirety.

“I'll admit I find myself quite delighted by the prospect of learning more.” He ran deft fingers over the keys, a complete C scale, without breaking his gaze. “But alas, certain things require my attention, so I'll have to return you.”

Will twisted his hands in his lap, wondering if he should reach out and take the book, or if his wrists would be bound at his back again. He watched the other stand from his instrument and walk towards one of the bedside tables, from the top drawer he pulled a familiar pair of glasses, the frame slightly bent and one hinge loose enough that the temple hung unfolded from between the man's fingers.

He closed the space between them in three long strides and placed a firm finger under Will's chin, lifting his face so he could slide the glasses into place himself. Will shivered at the touch. Hannibal's fingers lingered at the sides of his face longer than necessary and Will had to force himself not to jerk away.

“There,” He spoke softly, a sinister sound from the lips of someone so heinous. He stepped back, retrieving the cuffs from where he had left them at the end of his bed and held them up for Will to see.

“Do I need to use these?” His tone had returned to one of disinterest, as if he didn't mind either way.

Will shook his head, feeling like a child cautioned, and gathered the book into his arms, standing to follow Hannibal from the room after taking it all in once more now that he could see clearly.

Once returned to his room, his *cage*, he curled amongst the blankets on top of the plush bedroll and opened the book, glad that the light remained on and buzzing above him. The first page promised a pretentious read, mentions of Rossini's 'The thieving magpie' and the London symphony.

Still, he soon lost himself to the peculiar tale, and almost forgot his predicament completely as the hours passed by without the same gut-wrenching mixture of fear and monotony as before.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

More than a little tipsy, sorry if i missed the grammar and that.

With the mornings spent, as suggested, always in Hannibal's company, and the delivery of two meals a day, one in Hannibal's room and the next in his own, Will found he could keep track of the time far easier. He counted seven days and Hannibal kept to his word; the light left on and the bedroll and blankets remaining. They came to an unsteady agreement, that Will would suffer the uneasy intimacy of Hannibal's bathing only twice a week, if he promised not to exert himself in any way. When alone, Will had only his book to keep boredom at bay, but he read it in increments, unsure if he would be granted the privilege of a second once that one was completed. Only two chapters, sometimes three, a day. There was yet to be any mention of a bird, and Will wondered if that was part of the pretension.

When the latch to his door slid open on the seventh morning, Will got to his feet, ready to be ordered to the wall by the man that everyone, apart from Hannibal, referred to as Dolarhyde. He was gaining tidbits of information as the days passed, matching names to faces in the short walk from his room to Hannibal's and back again.

However it wasn't Dolarhyde that entered, but Hannibal himself, cuffs glinting readily in his hand.

He bound Will's wrists, thankfully in front of him, and guided him from the room with a firm hand around his upper arm. Will managed not to shrink away from his touch at all now, with much determination, though it helped that it rarely seemed improper. Even when he ran the wash cloth over his naked body it was with a detached professionalism.

“I thought we might take a walk this morning,” His tone implied a mere suggestion though it was clear from the lack of paper or pen that Will had about as much choice in this as he did in anything. He was thankful though for the promise of fresh air, and allowed himself to be led to the front door, committing the route to memory for future reference.

The silence that existed throughout the desolate hallway to his room vanished as they stepped outside, confronted with a barrage of noise from all directions. They walked across the same sparsely grassed land that Will had been tossed to upon his arrival, but it didn't look so menacing in the morning light and without the circle of rabid survivors closing in on him.

Instead they were dotted now, most of them at work in one way or another. Some shot him perplexed glances, other's glared as a predator might at their prey, whisked away from them before they could devour it. None approached them, and all bowed their heads, returning to their work, when Hannibal's eyes passed over them.

Will lifted his face to the sun, breathing in the dewy scent of damp grass and Hannibal allowed it, dropping his hand from his arm until he appeared to have had his fill.

“It took a great deal of trial and error, but we're mostly self-sustainable at this point.” Hannibal guided him towards rows of raised earth, sprouting stalks and leaves, with a hand to his elbow.

Farming, it was something Will had tried initially, within the first year, but he'd failed miserably. Most of the fertile ground was charred beyond use. The only form of fresh food he'd eaten since, besides the meat of unsuspecting rabbits and squirrels, were the wild berries he would find occasionally between sharp thorns in the wooded areas on the outskirts of the city.

Will couldn't help but feel at least moderately impressed, he'd wondered how such a large group had fed themselves when there were no outsiders for them to slaughter. The faded tins and cans he occasionally found weren't enough to sustain even himself and his beloved mutt, let alone a community of this size.

He ran his eyes over the crops, recognising the bright leafy clusters as lettuce and the red stalks topped with darker green leaves as beetroot. He might have asked what the other plants were, the thinner stalks that were entirely green, with leaves that resembled a pine tree's, or the rows that looked like tiny bushes with fanning tear shaped leaves, but of course he was unable.

When he turned from them, Hannibal was watching him intently, a small smile tugging at his lips. He was proud, Will noticed, of what he had accomplished here.

“Fruit is more difficult,” He guided him onwards again, to a wooden trellis weaved through with ripe strawberries. Will's mouth watered, he found himself aching to reach out and pluck one free, longing for the familiar taste.

“If I fed you one of these, there would be anarchy.” Hannibal mused, looking back over the workers who now watched them closely with narrowed eyes. “We ration carefully, to keep some sense of order, you see.”

Reluctantly, Will turned and let Hannibal take him further out. The land seemed to go on endlessly and Will contemplated how far Hannibal's people would be dotted along it. How many he'd need to sneak past before he'd be free to run desperately fast, away from this prison.

“Honey however-” The voice pulled him from his thought, “-is something we tend to have in abundance.”

Will followed the man's line of vision, settling on five wooden hives, each swarmed by the colonies of bees that resided within. Between them all stood a pale woman with dark eyes sunk deep into her head and clammy skin. She seemed either unaware or uncaring of the insects that landed briefly on her shoulders and amongst scraggly blonde hair.

“Katherine” Hannibal nodded his head in greeting, his voice gentled in the way one might speak to a child.

She looked up then with a toothy smile, and her eyes drifted from Hannibal's face to Will's.

“Have you tried the honey?” She asked him, in a half whisper as if it were a secret that any existed in the first place.

Will shook his head slowly, but his eyes remained on hers and he felt his chest tighten in panic at what he found there.

“Ah,” She took a small step towards him and he stiffened, she scanned his face and reached out with searching fingers to hover over his eyes.

“It's a shame,” she sighed, looking to Hannibal then back at Will. “He would have looked lovely with a head full of bees.”

Will jerked back from her and her eyes became sad, for *him*, he knew. For, in her eyes, the lack of fulfilled potential. There was no question as to why she had joined Hannibal, madness exuded from every inch of her.

“There will be others,” Hannibal promised her, reaching out for Will again, who at first pulled his arms away from him. He tutted, almost an admonishment and the second time Will allowed him, heart racing against his ribcage, to lead him. Thankfully it was away from the deranged beekeeper.

It seemed that only the most unsettled humans could survive a demonic apocalypse, and Will looked to Hannibal, hoping that the reason he'd kept him alive was not because he'd sensed some form of rapport between them. It would not be the first time he'd questioned his own sanity, both before and after the world fell apart.

He didn't look up from his feet until they stopped, and even then he was reluctant to discover what was in store for him next. When he did, what he saw was far worse than cannibal farmers and murderous bee enthusiasts.

A tall barrier made of woven metal chain-link that reached at least seven foot in height. Atop it were loops of barbed wire, so that anyone who did manage to climb it would land in shreds at the other side.

Will swallowed the bile that rose in his throat and followed the length of it, stretching so far into the distance that it faded to nothingness long before it reached a corner or a gate of any sort. The beasts would easily fly over it, it wasn't to keep them out, it was to keep people like Will *in.*

Only a small shaky breath escaped him, he'd been taken to it for a reason.

“I see the intent in your eyes Will,” Hannibal's voice came from behind him, far enough away that Will realised he'd walked towards the fence in his examination of it. “I would have it quashed before you do something foolish.”

There were several seconds of silence, the words settling in, before Will flung himself at the barrier, the impact of his cuffs ringing out as he beat at it to no avail. In his head he swore and cursed Hannibal, this place, the apocalypse, everything, until the words in his head turned to the anguished cries that escaped his lips and his beating slowed to a half-struggle. He slipped to his knees and banged his head against it instead, until that too, stopped and he sobbed, fingers gripping through the chain link.

Hannibal came up behind him once he'd exhausted himself, shushing him and running a hand through his curls. Will wanted to resist, butt him away, but he didn't have the energy. Every chance of escape seemed thwarted now. He hit at the fence once more with his fists, now sore and bruising, and his sobs faded to whimpers and then silent tears.

Hannibal continued to card through his hair until he composed himself enough to pull away from him and slowly get to his feet. His legs felt shaky beneath him, the cuffs heavier than they should be, now just more of a reminder that he was utterly trapped.

“Breakfast now, I think,” Hannibal spoke in the same impassive tone as always, entirely unmoved by Will's misery, and there was nothing Will could do but walk silently alongside him.

The only thing he wanted now was to be left alone, in his tiny prison, but when he tried to stop outside of the door Hannibal simply forced him onwards and up the stairs to his own room where he sat him on the side of the bed rather than the stool.

There was no paper, Will had nothing to write, but the bowl of soup was steaming on the desk and Hannibal brought it over to Will and knelt between his legs.

Will stared past him, through the painting on the far wall, as a fork was raised to his mouth. Only the smell of it pulled him from the dazed state he'd slipped into and he peered briefly down to see a chunk of meat dangerously close to his lips.

He gasped, a small, quiet thing, and tried to scramble back across the bed, but Hannibal gripped his ankles tightly in one hand and his wrists were still bound.

“Will, make this easier on yourself, and open your mouth.”

He shook his head, dizzy from the earlier exertion, and felt tears sting the back of his eyes again.

“Will-”

A tiny whimper, a pitiful sound, and he shook his head more fervently, trying to kick his legs free and twists away. Hannibal's strength outmatched him entirely and the fork was raised once more to prod against his lips. All he could do was keep them tightly sealed.

Hannibal sighed, proof of his agitation but not a surrender. He placed the bowl beside him on the floor and stood.

“If you eat you can keep the light, if not-” He didn't have to finish the sentence, the words had already struck panic as they meant to and now Will was shaking.

The thought of being left in complete darkness again, unable to read, the only accompaniment his own shallow breathing, was too much. He couldn't bear to feel the walls cave in on him again, the floor falling away.

He glanced down at the bowl, thick chunks bobbing amongst the liquid and counted five of them. He shuddered and looked up through his lashes at the man stood before him, eyes pleading. Then, when he accepted that there would be no reasoning with him, he looked back of the food on the floor, resisting the urge to kick the bowl over.

He was still shaking his head, slowly now. He was looking at the cooked remains of a person. Was, truthfully, considering obliging and eating said person. They were dead, they'd have been killed regardless of what Will had to say about it, regardless of whether or not he contributed in the cannibalism of their corpse. Hannibal seemed intent to wait out his inner conflict, scooping the bowl up into his hands and remaining standing. Minutes passed, Will stilling himself, breathing deeply to calm himself enough to think things through properly. Eventually hopelessness won out, and he turned to Hannibal, nodding.

As the fork was raised Will pulled back, an involuntary reaction, and bit his lip in frustration. Hannibal tilted his head, waiting for him to compose himself and then tried again, smiling when his mouth opened enough for him to push the forkful through and drag the fork free against his uncooperative bottom lip.

Will breathed through his nose heavily in panic, considering spitting the food back at the man stood over him. His mouth remained half open, the food resting heavy against his tongue.

“Chew Will,” Hannibal's voice was softer than usual, and he did as he was told, a tear running down his cheek as he took the first bite.

It was shameful and wrong but he managed to swallow, telling himself over and over that it was just another rabbit.

He tensed, ready for the next forkful to be offered, already feeling nauseous, but when he allowed his lips to slide apart a second time Hannibal only smiled and walked back to the desk to place the bowl down.

“You did very well, Will.” He told him, placing a hand on his shoulder upon returning to his side. “You can sleep now, here.”

He was helped to his feet, supported by one strong arm as the other peeled back the blanket and then guided him between the sheets which were pulled up to his chin. Shaking still, he watched the man uncertainly, as he took a seat at the desk to finish all that was left of the soup.

“Sleep, Will.” Hannibal glanced back over his shoulder at him as he spoke, “and when you wake the light will still be on.”

Feeling hollow and detached, Will nestled his face against the thick pillow beneath his head and somehow, after the madness of the morning, managed to fall into a heavy dreamless sleep.

When he woke he was sent back to his room with a second book and the light, as promised, was still on.

Chapter 7

Will tried not to withdraw into himself in the weeks after the incident. Just because one route had been thwarted, did not mean there weren't others to be discovered. Still, he struggled to communicate with his captor as willingly as before; quickly jotting down one worded answers to his questions and shrugging, nodding, or shaking his head when it would suffice. On the second day, Hannibal had him eat two mouthfuls of the same soup, and on the third day three, and so on and so forth until Will could just about manage to finish the bowl, teary eyed and trembling by the end of it. He was sullen, neglecting his books in favour of sleeping more often, and showing Hannibal enough disinterest that more often than not he was excused early from their mornings together. He did just enough that Hannibal had no reason to kill him, however he was running out of reasons to actively keep him alive.

“Do you still enjoy the sound of the harpsichord, Will?” He asked, watching as the slumped form at his desk nodded without turning to face him. It was a half-lie, music was the only pleasant thing left now, but he didn't get much enjoyment out of anything anymore.

“I thought I might teach you,” Hannibal scooted aside on the velvet bench, wide enough to fit two and patted the seat. “Come.”

Will obeyed, as he did in most things, but it was as a half empty shell of the man Hannibal had first seen knelt on the ground, quaking beneath his touch. He tapped a single key pointedly, and when Will did not follow suit, he grasped one of his wrists to direct him. It was the first time he had been allowed to touch the instrument, and despite everything the novelty was not lost on him. He pressed the key again, feeling some slight power in being the one to create the sound. Hannibal nodded, and this time spread three fingers out in a simple chord, humming his approval when Will copied the shape in a lower octave. Hannibal watched vague interest reappear behind blue eyes and felt glad that he wouldn't have reason to let his people take Will as food. Frederick had been livid when his prize had been taken from him, but he was such a senseless little man that Hannibal would have sooner offered *him* up instead. There was depth to Will, and he'd like to unravel him and explore it. The company he kept left a lot to be desired, but this man he had kept for a reason.

Hannibal shifted from an A chord to a D and Will copied him, ducking his head when he pressed against the E minor instead, the notes clashing clumsily, the mistake particularly noticeable as the metallic sound echoed around them. He pulled his hand back into his lap, wringing his fingers, as if expecting Hannibal to chastise him.

“Skill comes from practice, Will.” Hannibal assured him, happy to finally have caught his attention with something, anything, and not willing to let him slip back inside of himself.

Will shifted nervously beside him, suddenly aware of their proximity now that he was no longer sheltered in his daydreams. Hannibal's eyes remained on him until, eventually, he nodded and lifted his hand again, this time pressing the chord correctly, a light happy thing compared to the sharp yet sombre melodies that usually drifted from beneath Hannibal's fingers.

“Again.”

And so Will played it again, and then again, and found himself almost content with the simplicity of the lesson, happy to have something to occupy his hands and his mind without being tedious. Something to distract him from the reality of his existence in that moment.

As the minutes passed, Will all but forgot the man sat next to him, save for the steady instructions that came from his direction, so he startled when a strong hand settled against the small of his back to correct his posture. The playing stopped and he took a deep breath, trying to calm himself when the hand did not remove itself. Hannibal waited, amused by the reaction, wondering what might happen now and more than satisfied when the choppy, unpractised music sounded again from beneath shaking hands. He would have the nervous young man grow to trust him in time, enough that he might get his fill of the workings of his mind and perhaps, in time, his body.

He pulled his hand away eventually, observing Will relax slightly, despite the fact that their shoulders were now touching instead, apparently unnoticed by him. It had already occurred to Hannibal that he could shape this man, manipulate him enough that he wouldn't run if given the chance, cultivate dependency. There was an openness in him, a need and a talent to understand and that could be beautifully exploited. He'd seen the flicker of confusion on his captive's face, meeting his eyes in a searching gaze and coming away with nothing, the masks Hannibal had equipped himself with when it was needed, still effective now. He doubted he could mislead Will with falsity, but perhaps he could let enough slip past to have Will think he were making progress in his understanding. A small smile when he felt genuinely mirthful, only a hint of anger here and there to keep him in line while the deceit set in.

Hannibal's gaze lingered on Will's face, his facial hair grown too long and scruffy in captivity and a wonderful balance of fear and concentration behind blue eyes. He'd like to see him clean shaven, and found himself imagining wide, worrisome eyes as he ran his flat blade along a tense jaw. He let out a pleased hum at the thought, timed well enough that Will might have thought it appraisal for correctly playing the first four eight counts of *Mariage D'amour*, at least the left hand anyway. It would take him weeks to become ambidextrous in his playing, and Hannibal found that he revelled in the thought of having a captive student to stave off the boredom that had been building before his capture.

The arrival of breakfast found Will sat at the desk once more, trusted now to feed himself, his adam's apple bobbing furiously in his struggle to consume the food, all in the name of light. The dread that darkness brought was not lost on Hannibal, having spent days at a time locked in the basement level of his childhood school, at the behest of a particularly abusive teacher. It was why he had employed the tactic, well aware of its efficiency. Will set the bowl down, blinking back the tears that were becoming more controllable now and wiping those that had escaped down his cheeks and along the length of his nose. Hannibal hummed his approval, always allowing gentle appreciation when his wishes were fulfilled, in the hope that Will might grow to yearn for such recognition.

“I thought we might talk now,” more an order to be followed than a simple suggestion.

Will pulled open the drawer above his knees to get out the paper and pencil as he knew to do. He didn't linger on the nagging thought that this had all become routine, something he found

himself falling into almost without the simple mendacity it would take to gain Hannibal's trust and leniency. Hannibal took in the sight of his semi-obedient captive, something not unlike fondness settling in his chest.

“Tell me, what did you see Will, when you looked into Miss Pimms eyes?” He relished the nervous twitch of the young man's shoulders, the tension that built at the back of his neck and promised compelling and reluctant conversation.

Will reached to write honestly, stilling his hand when he realised he was in danger of revealing too much, of destroying what small advantage his empathy had granted him. He thought of the madness in the woman's eyes, of the connection he had felt with her when he pictured a skull, sweet with decay and teeming with honeybees.

'I don't understand the question', he wrote instead.

Tutting, Hannibal stood from the stool and put distance between them. There would be no closeness, no touch, for disapproval and so he'd learn to fear their separation.

“It's disappointing, Will, that after all this time you still oppose me when all I wish to do is understand you, so that I may make your life here more suited to you.” A gentle lie, spoken only softly enough that Will wouldn't grow aggravated.

Eventually, such statements would cause guilt, a need to redeem himself in Hannibal's eyes, but for now he was content to have at least a physical hold on the man.

Rolling his shoulders, to ease the irritation, the need to fight and flee when fleeing was impossible, Will wrote again. This time a half lie, like the many that Hannibal supplied him with.

'She seemed mentally unbalanced'.

“You can do better than that Will,” Hannibal stepped a little closer, “you once lectured on criminal profiling. Create a profile for her.”

'I didn't see her crimes'

“Ah, but you know they exist.”

The buzzing filled his ears, the image of his own head hollowed, eyes gauged from their sockets, mouth gaping open with a tongue swollen from bee stings. He had built shields, before the world ended, so that he wouldn't get lost in other's minds, shields that seemed to have deteriorated entirely. He remembered her words, '*he would have looked lovely with a head full of bee*s', and supposed it didn't take someone with an empathy disorder to read her intentions.

'She makes hives out of human carcasses.'

“Almost,” Another step closer, creeping silently up behind him, “Try harder, Will.”

He closed his eyes, concentrating. All he wanted now was to return to his room, to escape the man who was probing his mind. He saw himself again, bees resting upon hollowed cheeks, fluttering on him, around him, *in* him. This time though, as honey trickled from his nostril and pooled beneath his face, he watched himself gasp for air, a strained gurgle sounding from deep in his throat.

'You weren't going to kill me'. He all but etched the words through the paper and into the wood below, the lines of lead thick and pointed with the disgust of the hand that had written them.

“Not right away,” Hannibal agreed, calmly, finally closing the space between them to tease the curls that fell at the base of Will's neck.

He jerked away from the touch, the all too familiar feeling of bile rising in his throat, and dropped the pencil to clatter against the desk surface, hands trembling. *Never* right away, not for any of the people who were unfortunate enough to be brought to this place.

“It's surprising how compliant somebody becomes, after being lobotomised.” The words were mumbled into his ear, Hannibal leaning too close. A warning perhaps, in his choice of words.

Will drew in a shaky breath and stumbled to his feet, the stool tipping to the floor behind him. Hannibal reached out quickly to catch his arm and steady him before he tripped over it in his struggle, letting go just as promptly and allowing him to scramble to the corner of the room.

“I wonder what you see then, when you look at me.”

Will shook his head, refusing to look his captor in the eye. He wouldn't stroke his ego in that way, he would not yield his empathy to Hannibal's control. Hannibal seemed to accept that, for the moment at least. He would have Will for as long as he wanted him, there was plenty of time for everything he had planned. Will was returned to his room, with a new book for his efforts, and so he slept, as he usually did in an attempt to temporarily escape his bleak existence. When he awoke it was with a start and coated in a film of sweat from a particularly horrid nightmare.

“Well well, welcome to the land of the *living*. Your ticket should have *expired* by now, but here you are still. *Fabulous*!”

Will noticed the darkness first, his light was off and with the realization came a sickeningly tight feeling in his gut, had he really offended Hannibal so much? Then the familiarity of the malicious voice hit him and he knew he was within touching distance of the man he had sent to the floor with an elbow to the stomach weeks before. The door was open only a crack, just enough light slivering through to illuminate a silhouette of the rounded face and puffy lips, twisted into a sickening grin, of the man crouched over him. Of *Verger,* Will knew.

He wriggled away from him enough to sit up, back pressed to the wall and knees drawn up to his chest. His eyes darted between the exit and Verger's face, trying to read his intention and knowing it wouldn't be anything remotely good.

“Ah, ah. No running this time *Mr Graham*,” He shifted back then, to sit on his heels and obscure the view of the door, “You and I are going to have some good, *funny* times.”

“It's *peculiar,*” he continued, in a drawl “the boss has never kept a *pet* before. Quite the *aggressive* pet too, if I do say so myself.”

Will drew in a deep breath, whether it was a failed attempt to cuss at Verger or to call for his captor to come save him he wasn't sure, but of course no sound escaped his lips. His mouth opened again, brows furrowing with frustration, there was no lack of insults he would hurl at the maniac before him if he could.

“And a *mute*, how *charming*,” Verger's words, spewed in a mock gush, caused Will's fists to curl.

He sat a little straighter, not a trembling penned in creature, but a capable ex-cop who had survived years alone in hell. Even as he looked into the man's eyes and saw the monstrosities there he knew it was nothing compared to the demons no doubt circling around them that very moment.

“Keep those baby blues open, Mr Graham.” A clear threat, even as he reached out to bop Will's nose.

He rose to his feet then, looming over Will for a moment before turning to leave and, thankfully, flipping the light back on. Will squinted against the glare of the bulb and by the time his sight came into focus again, the door was shut and he was alone.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

So, this was the original note with this chapter:

'Happy New Year Everybody! Lets hope 2016 sees some potential for Hannibal being renewed!'

I know it's been years, but I'm still holding onto a teeny tiny shred of hope. What about you guys?

“I envision our arrangement as long term,” Hannibal spoke in the same carefully conjured tone as always, placing a dish of cooked meat and vegetables before Will and taking the seat opposite him. “That being said, I think it only appropriate that you familiarise yourself with the house.”

Will picked up the fork he'd been offered, a new leniency, especially in uncuffed hands, and teased the meat with it. They were sat in a dining room, not a communal mess of tables and unmatching chairs as Will had pictured, but an elegantly decorated space with a long mahogany table at the centre. They were alone, much to Will's relief. He had caught several sidelong glances and knowing looks from Verger, but for now the direful man was nowhere to be seen. He hadn't even considered mentioning the threat to Hannibal, that would imply far too much trust and acceptance. Spearing a slice of carrot onto his fork prongs he nodded, as if the decision, or any decision for that matter, lay even remotely in his hands.

“I'm glad you agree,” Hannibal smiled, his words not mocking Will's position but rather playing along with the uneasy truce the two of them maintained.

In all honesty, the thought of being allowed to venture semi-freed in the mansion was both liberating and alarming. He spent hours aching to be let out of his tiny room, but outside of it lurked all manner of psychopaths; Verger and Katherine enough to drive anybody into a hovel of their own making. It was progress though, a step in the direction of the plan Will had clung to when he'd first been brought here, before he'd seen the towering, never-ending fence. His heart twinged at the thought of it, but he pulled the carrot between his lips and eyed the slice of meat as he chewed, knowing he'd be shown no leniency in that regard.

“You will need to remain handcuffed of course, when I am not around to monitor you, but you'll be allowed anywhere on the first floor and in the gardens during the day.”

Will nodded his understanding, trying not to let the sudden rush of hope he felt betray his feigned nonchalance. The fence was ridiculously tall and somehow spanned the whole perimeter of the property, but a fence had to have a *gate*, and a gate meant an escape. In his

excitement he almost didn't acknowledge that the next forkful he raised to his lips was a plump and perfectly cooked piece of meat. Hannibal watched it vanish between his lips and offered him a small smile.

“We shall still spend our mornings together,” Hannibal assured, “you have made notable improvement with the harpsichord and it would please me to continue tutoring you in your musical endeavours.”

Will nodded again, not so much ignoring the paper and pencil beside his plate as not having much to say on the matter. He had become quite adept at reciting some of the simpler works of classical pianists, no longer needing Hannibal to compensate by stepping in to play the notes required of the right hand. He almost enjoyed the lessons but had to make an effort to ignore the complements, that had such a blatant purpose, from his captor. He breathed a small sigh of relief as he swallowed the last mouthful of food, leaving his plate spotless as was expected. Hannibal stood to, Will assumed, lead him back to his room but as he got up to follow Hannibal gestured for him to stay seated.

“You aren't free of me yet Will, only a brief reprieve as I take these to the kitchen,” He lifted the two plates in his hands pointedly, “Wait here please.”

And he was gone, so Will waited, growing more anxious as the seconds ticked by and cursing himself for doing so. It was only that Hannibal would keep Verger at bay, he told himself, but somewhere at the back of his mind he felt the nagging suspicion that maybe Stockholm syndrome was beginning to set it. It had happened in cases that, even Will with his rare gift of empathy, could hardly believe such a bond could occur. People beaten, raped even, and still defensive of their captors, mourning over their arrest and writing to them for years to follow. If that were possible then Will shuddered to contemplate just how attached he might become to a man who had yet to lay a hand on him in any way other than to offer unwanted comfort and support - and occasionally an awkward bathing.

He heard footsteps approaching and tensed, shooting a look to the doorway in time to see two vaguely familiar figures pass by. He sighed, rubbing the heels of his hands hard against his eyes and wondering how long he could cope with the stress of anticipating Verger's move against him. He had no control here, no gun, not even shoes to make his kicks more efficient. If Verger wanted to hurt him, kill him even, all he had to do was wait until Hannibal was asleep or otherwise occupied and Will would be a sitting duck. He glanced towards the paper, wondering if it would be worth mentioning it to Hannibal after all, but decided against it vehemently. Hannibal was not his saviour or his friend, he wasn't Will's protector he was his captor, the man who kept him in a suffocatingly small room and had him eat *people*. A paltry voice in his head reasoned that it wasn't Hannibal who had brought him here, but it was he who decided not to kill him. It was he who gave him light and books and a bed of sorts and made the consequences of Frederick's actions less uncomfortable. He banished the voice to the far corners of his mind and folded his arms across himself as if to ward off any more unwelcome argument in the man's defence.

In the kitchen Hannibal stood a moment to enjoy a small glass of wine. He'd had crates of it before this started and had retrieved them from his old home when he'd had the chance. He knew Will would be awaiting his return and hoped he was growing more nervous by the

second, that his reappearance would bring him comfort, however disquieting that would be for the poor young man. His designs for his captive were working out splendidly, and the new freedom afforded him would be a test, and a very interesting one at that. He felt excitement boiling low in his chest as he tried to anticipate the man's next move. Will Graham really did cut through the usual boredom Hannibal felt in the fortress he had built around himself.

He swilled the last sip of wine in his glass, sniffing it, savouring the moments away from the man, the moments in which a crucial dependency was being forged. Then he tipped the glass to his lips and returned to the dining room, wondering which vintage his captive would prefer when the time called for it. A second set of advancing footfalls had Will just as rigid and ready to defend himself and so he had to make an effort to hide the relief that flooded through him when Hannibal appeared in the doorway, an appreciative smile offered his way for staying put.

“I thought you might appreciate a tour of the house,” He suggested, no Will reminded himself, not a *suggestion*, there was never a choice.

He shrugged but got to his feet. Mapping the interior out in his mind could only be an advantage

after all.

“Wonderful,” Hannibal brushed a hand along Will's arm as he passed him and smiled fondly when he saw straight through the forced flinch in reaction to the touch. He really did enjoy the young man and it was almost a shame that his inevitable escape attempt would force his hand in a way that was far more unkind than the treatment he had shown him so far.

“The kitchen first, I think.”

At that Will felt his hands tremble, imagining blood-soaked tiles and half-sawn limbs scattered across the counters, but then realised that if the immaculate dining room and bedroom were anything to go by, the kitchen would be nothing short of a show room. And the gleaming marble worktops and spotless alabaster floor proved that theory. Along the far wall four tall freezers hummed, but their sinister contents were well concealed behind shining white doors. Without the knowledge of what lurked there, Will might have found some comfort in the nostalgia a functioning kitchen provided. There was a sleek aga in place of an oven and the utensils were far more expensive than anything Will had ever owned, but still the familiarity of it all made it difficult to picture the preparation of anything other than wholesome and innocent meals. A varnished wooden knife stand stood beckoning on the island, five smooth handles that promised blades sharp enough to stab and slit and maim. Hannibal followed Will's gaze and pulled one free. It slid with a gentle hiss from its casing.

“From my own home,” He explained, balancing the handle on a half open palm before holding it out within Will's reach.

Will felt his breath catch, it would be a simple matter to grasp the handle and drag the blade along his captors throat. But the effort would be in vain, they both knew it, or else the blade

would not have been offered to him. Instead he huffed indignantly and folded his arms over his chest.

“I had wondered if you valued your life over your ego,” Hannibal slipped it into its proper place as he spoke, “I am glad to see you're not short-sighted, though I never doubted your judgement, Will.”

Angry to be taunted in such a way, Will glared as he followed him to a wide archway that lead to the living area. It was the room in which most of the household seemed to have gathered. Frederick sat, chest puffed, talking in a tone that dripped with arrogance, to two other men and a red-haired woman who seemed not at all impressed with what he had to say. She turned when she noticed the hovering forms in the doorway and raised a brow beneath her tight curls.

Across from them, in one of two large chairs, sat Dolerhyde, also apparently discontented with the company on offer. Thankfully Verger was nowhere to be seen. Despite his absence, Will hovered nervously, reluctant to join Hannibal on the velvet chaise lounge as if he weren't a prisoner but a house guest. Instead he shuffled his feet in place, feeling exposed under the scrutiny of all the eyes that had suddenly fallen on him. Other than Dolerhyde, the people gathered here weren't killers by nature, just people weak-willed enough, or so concerned with their own self-preservation, that killing had become an acceptable means of survival. One of the men escaped Fredericks clutches to lean down and light the fire at the centre of the far wall. He was slight, with dark messy hair too long at the back and a nervous demeanour. There was something overwhelmingly soft about him, and only in such a place out of fear or manipulation, Will could tell immediately.

“Peter,” He stopped poking the flames upon hearing his name, but did not immediately turn to face them “perhaps you could show Will the chicken coop,” Hannibal suggested. The man ran a hand over a scruffy moustache and beard as if reluctant, but his sunken brown eyes lit up and he stilled the ticking of his neck long enough to find Will and offer a half smile.

~

The chickens were kept in a part of the garden that Will hadn't seen the last time he was outside.

He followed the little man with the nervous tic, bound himself in handcuffs now that he was out of Hannibal's sight, and almost laughed at what a pair they made. The monstrous fence towered a few metres away from them, an ever-present reminder that, for now at least, he was stuck there. The coop was in fact a rather large shed, and the birds clucked and flustered as they entered it, sending feathers and straw into the air around them.

“This is K-Kevin,” Peter pointed a quivering hand to a particularly plump rooster with a bright red wattle and comb at the far end of the shed, “he's my favourite.”

He turned to Will, as if expecting his input, and so he nodded understandingly.

“You don't talk?” Peter's voice resembled a child's, high pitched and laced with an uneasy innocence, “Yeah, okay. I don't much, got kicked by a horse. Boom” He pointed to the right

side of his head and Will found himself wondering how the man had survived the apocalypse before coming across Hannibal. It wasn't hard to see through the mob of persistent cognitive problems, no doubt made worse by stress, the man Peter had once been. Adept and compassionate, never confident or outgoing, but far more independent than the world now allowed him to be. Will felt his features softening sympathetically which Peter seemed to latch onto, his own becoming suddenly wrought with anxiety.

“Oh! But don't blame the animals!” The raised voice startled the birds, so he turned to shush them, gentle hands smoothing down ruffled feathers.

Will watched him trying to comfort the animals and felt himself warm to the man, he was possibly the most sane person he had met so far. There was no malice in him, perhaps if they'd met under different circumstances, they could have been friends. He wondered if Peter had been brought here against his will.

“Do you like them? Animals?”

Will nodded, stepping further into the shed and wondering how Winston might have taken to the flock of birds. His chest tightened as he pictured his loyal friend. He wished he could speak then. He'd have told Peter all about him, he would have understood.

“We had more you know,” Peter started to search through the straw and gather the eggs he found there, clutching them in his arms until he found a basket behind him to keep them in, Will followed suit, as well as he could with cuffed wrists.

“Animals, I mean, pigs and cows and even a horse, but-” his brows furrowed and he shook his head as if trying to dislodge an image from his mind, “the things they-” he cleared his throat and left it at that, pulling his arms in around himself.

It wasn't hard for Will to piece together, the image of winged demons scorching the animals and dragging their charred bodies into the air to be torn between viscous teeth. He nodded knowingly as he placed his own eggs, one in each hand, beside Peter's in the basket.

“I do this everyday, the eggs” He brought his hand up to cover the top half of his face, bowing his head nervously, “you could, if you w-want, you could come with me again-”

He waited for an answer, only forcing himself to look up when he remembered Will couldn't give one. When Will nodded his agreement his eyes shone. It was easy enough to see what Peter saw when he looked at him. Will was safe, Will was quiet. He couldn't trick and tease like the others and he liked animals too. He followed Peter from the shed, back to the main house, full of regret that came with the knowledge he would have to inevitably use this man for his own means.

Chapter 9

The dotted trees outside of the perimeter were turning from green to a mess of auburn and crumbling brown. Will tried not to consider what that meant, knowing it had been late summer when he had been taken. Since he'd been given the mock-freedom of being allowed to wander the grounds, his days had been a constant repeat of the same infuriating search for a viable escape. He spent the mornings with Hannibal, learning more complex compositions now, earning his trust, and dodging any of his questions that might reveal how far he was from accepting some twisted future with him. Then he'd meet Peter at the chicken coop, the only time he felt himself truly relax, and would offer as much help as he could while his hands were cuffed. Finally, he'd pace along the fence, searching for a gate and never finding one, no matter how many times he looped the property. The fence was an impossibly solid obstacle that he had no way to overcome, and without the paper and pencil that were only offered upon Hannibal's order, Will had no way to even ask if Peter knew of a way out, let alone gain his trust enough that he might be willing to share the specifics with him.

He came to the corner where he had started his walk and slumped down against the chain-link in defeat. Verger, Dolarhyde and several others had gone on a supply run a few days prior, so Will at least felt safe enough to spend his afternoons alone in the more secluded areas of the camp. He sighed and trailed his finger through the dirt beside himself absent-mindedly, creating swirls and zigzags before destroying them with one sweep from the palm of his hand. Will leant down to begin again and froze, finger outstretched still as he appreciated the simplicity of it. He struggled to stand, quite the feat with no free hand to push himself up from the ground, and made his way to where he knew Peter would be - trying not to run to him and cause suspicion. He found him crouched outside the coop, under a scarlet maple tree, watching some of the free-roaming hens go about their business intently. He sat beside him, the dirt was more compact there and he had to use a snapped twig to carve his words into the hard, brown lumps of earth.

'I have a dog' He managed before his twig snapped and he had to pick up another.

Peter grinned sheepishly at the revelation, trailing his fingers over the words a moment before allowing Will to brush them away and start anew.

'His name is Winston'

“Winston is a good name,” Peter fell back from his heels to sit beside Will more comfortably, “Where is he now?”

'I lost him wh-' the second twig snapped too, and Will took a deep breath to calm himself, quickly finding another amongst the fallen leaves scattered around them, '*-en they brought me here.*'

Peter's face fell and he glanced quickly at Will's before looking back at the childlike writing in the

mud. The sun was setting behind them, the remaining light reaching through the branches to the ground to dance across the words there. Will wouldn't have long before he'd be expected to show himself back to his room to be shut away for the night, like a pathetically obedient animal.

'I need to find him' he wrote, a prompt that Peter did not take well to, wringing his hands and twisting his face away from the words as if it might make the obvious request disappear.

“D-Dr Lecter wouldn't like that,” He stuttered nervously, “you can't, I can't-”

The crunch of dead leaves underfoot cut him off and his hands fell beside Will's to help him scrape away the evidence of their conversation, the mud beneath their fingernails more easily explained than the etchings in the dry earth.

“Will, Peter,” The familiar voice dripped like poisoned honey from behind them and Will immediately felt like a naughty schoolchild caught in the midst of some misdemeanour.

Only the fear was far more palpable than that the threat of a wooden ruler would stir in him. Peter leapt to his feet, mumbling incoherently about the chicken's evening routine and Hannibal offered him an indulgent smile and a tilt of his head in the direction of the coop to dismiss him. It took Will noticeably longer to hoist himself upright with the impediment the handcuffs caused, and by the time Hannibal's eyes fell on him his cheeks were flushed with humiliation, his trousers scuffed and dirty at the knees. He reached out to free the man of the cuffs, a luxury only offered in his presence, and Will dipped his head in thanks, rubbing the indents from his skin and feeling his shoulders relax as he circled them.

Hannibal had watched the two men communicate in the dirt for quite some time, not certain but fairly sure of the nature of their conversation. His suspicions had only been confirmed when he'd deliberately made his presence known to them, feeling the leaves crack and crumble beneath his feet and watching the two of them hurry to conceal the evidence. It was forever entertaining to watch Will, to see him study the fence that kept him there, to watch his features grow heavy as the changing seasons became apparent to him. Hannibal often mused that refraining from killing him had been an excellent decision on his part, even if he would have tasted exquisite. He had known that he would seek help eventually, even nudging him in Peter's direction to save him the trouble. He'd seen Will relax in the man's presence, seen him read the inherent kindness and malleability there, the potential to be influenced. He was delighted to see Will would be going through with manipulation of his only true ally. It would leave him isolated in the long run, when his plan inevitably failed, with only Hannibal to turn to. He watched as Will circled his wrists, unwittingly savouring the relief that Hannibal had provided him.

“It's been three days, Will.” Hannibal marvelled at the tinge of fondness in his chest as Will's head lowered in dismay.

He had come to accept the necessity of Hannibal bathing him, especially after three consecutive nights of waking drenched in sweat. Hannibal knew he would allow himself to be bound with reluctant submission and would force himself to keep his eyes open, to be present so that he'd know if anything else where going to happen to him.

Hannibal always afforded him the act of disinterest, but found himself wondering if Will had become familiar enough with him yet to read the tell-tale signs of arousal. His eyes darkening as he ran the cloth tenderly upwards along his inner thigh. As he pressed it as gentle as a kiss to his neck and face, watching blue eyes shift uncomfortably at the proximity and his body betray him by relaxing into the warmth of the water. He sighed as he began leading Will back to the house, he would miss such intimate interactions between them but he had no excuse to continue them now, with Will trying so hard to appear truly amenable. Will kept his head lowered as he approached the door to the basement, letting out a shaky breath as Hannibal drew up close behind him.

“Not the basement, not today,” Hannibal murmured into his ear, and smiled at the befuddlement that flickered across his captive's face as he led him gently by the wrist to his own ensuite.

Will hadn't seen the inside of the room before, bathrooms being as inoperative as they were now, and he gazed into the shine of pewter tiles and glossy white veneer, surprised to see the tub brimming with steaming water. It was rippled with soapy white, the same peppermint scent that Will had grown use to, and he felt himself unwind at the thought that he might be allowed to wash himself. Certainly he wasn't restrained, spread vulnerable, bare feet against a cold grate. He risked a look at Hannibal and found him standing quite impassively, no threat there, just the promise of another small leniency.

“The water was boiling when Frederick emptied it into the tub, it should be pleasant enough now.”

Hannibal sat on the edge of the bath, rolling up one sleeve with unnecessary precision to test the heat. He waited, eyebrow raised, basking in the blush that spread across Will's cheeks as he began to slip out of his clothing, despite the number of times he had done so before his captor. The trousers and shirt puddled at his feet, leaving him to shift awkwardly out of his briefs, the veil of steam doing nothing to conceal his nudity. Will waited a moment but Hannibal remained seated, almost smugly, on the side of the bath and so with a small huff of agitation and embarrassment, Will stepped past him and into the water. His groin barley missed a brush against the linen of Hannibal's trouser leg, saved only by his own hands, cupping to retain some form of modesty.

To his surprise he groaned as he sat, the water sliding up over his stomach as he rested his head against the sloping high back. He peered down at himself, to find that the consistency of soap and water covered him decently and he almost didn't mind that Hannibal sat over him, dipping a cloth in the water by his feet. He bit his lip as the cloth was brought to his exposed chest, he wanted to reach out and grab it, show Hannibal that he was perfectly capable of washing himself, but the thought that this could be taken from him, that he could easily be returned to the shackles and the white light of the basement stilled his hand.

Hannibal observed the inner conflict as the man stretched out in the water below him and balled his fists hard enough to dig tiny crescents into his own palms. It was quite charming, the cocktail of relief, fear and resignation that pooled ruddy beneath pale skin. He allowed his hand to slow, just minutely, as he ran the cloth up along Will's calf and thigh, enough to see Will's muscles tense and then uncoil again as his hand slid back down to his ankle.

Eventually, such touches would be entirely welcome, Hannibal assured himself. Will had been truly touch deprived when they'd first met, it would only take a few days to be reminded of that desolation before he accepted that he could not return to isolation again. He sighed, bringing a hand to Will's chest and splaying his fingers, what he was about to do wasn't entirely necessary, but Hannibal was curious what would happen. He pushed, gently at first, so that Will only slid enough that his curls spread out around his face on the surface of the water. The man tensed entirely at the movement, hands breaching the surface to steady himself against the sides of the tub. His eyes widened slightly and he strained his neck to glare down at Hannibal's offending hand. Hannibal pushed again, this time hard enough to submerge the man entirely, an unrelenting pressure even as Will kicked and grabbed aimlessly, sending warm water in waves over the side of the bath to splash against Hannibal's feet. His curls rose up around his face along with the bubbles of air he exhaled too quickly in his panic.

Will watched the distorted, swaying image of his captor from beneath the murky layer, pressure building in his throat and chest, a desperate ache for oxygen. Just as the edges of his vision started to fade to black and his head began to tilt back with the throbbing weight in his temples, did he allow his eyelids to flutter shut against the sting of soap. Hannibal tilted his head, patients as always, and watched the display in wonder until the thrashing finally slowed to the tap of feet and scrape of feeble fingers against the enamel. Only then did he relent, pulling Will's limp body up towards him and savouring the sound of the initial desperate gasp before his captive sputtered and collapsed against him, heaving body supported by strong arms as Hannibal leaned over to embrace him, stroking a hand along his back and shushing him. Not minding that he was now clad in a rather soppy shirt.

"I was only wetting your hair Will, shh." A lie, of course, they both knew it.

But for a moment, as the water threatened to fill his lungs, Will would have been certain that Hannibal had chosen to kill him, only to be proven wrong.

Trust.

Hannibal needed Will to trust that he would not die by his hands. And, he reminded himself as he continued to hush the whimpering man in his arms, to trust that Hannibal would always be the one to offer him comfort. He allowed Will a few more moments to shiver and sob against him before he lifted him, with a sturdy grip beneath his arms to stand, the water lapping just below his knees now. He left him, mindful of his swaying form, only long enough to retrieve a soft cotton bathrobe and help him slip his arms into it before leading him back into the adjoining bedroom and settling him on the banquette at the bottom of the bed. Will had composed himself and didn't hide his glower from Hannibal, who simply smiled and patted his shoulder as he walked past. Will pulled the robe more snugly around himself and crossed his arms. A petty show of defiance in the face of such cruel treatment, but defiance nonetheless.

"I would be more than happy to allow you to wash in this way from now on," Hannibal crossed the room to his wardrobe as he spoke, swiftly unbuttoning his shirt, "It's far more civilised, don't you agree?" He glanced over his shoulder as if for a reply, no hint of mockery, merely calm consideration for his Will's best interest.

Will offered only another rattling cough, his chest still burning, heart rate only now steadying, and turned from the bare-chested man. He ran his hands over his face and wondered why the only emotion he could muster was relief. Hannibal didn't let him drown, he pulled him out. He was alive when he could have so easily been snuffed out.

Will peered curiously through damp curls as his captor browsed the contents of a mahogany armoire. Inside was an assortment of tailored suits and cashmere jumpers, all in contrasting colours and patterns that only Hannibal, with his presence both muted and overbearing at once, could carry off. After what seemed like an unnecessary amount of time stroking fabric, he selected a shirt and burgundy suit vest and took his time to dress while Will sat, quite cold and frankly feeling rather exposed with his legs crossed under his robe. He shuffled nervously where he sat as Hannibal approached him, bringing a hand to the back of his own neck to try and hide the blush there. It was silly really, to feel exposed when in comparison to only a few moments before he was anything but. Perhaps it was the fact that the entire situation exemplified the fact that Will had very little control over anything while Hannibal's say was absolute. He was a half-drowned rat in nothing but a towelling robe under the rule of a python.

He needed Peter's help. And soon.

Chapter 10

“That's it,” Peter lifted a hand to soothe Will, but thought better of it and folded it into himself instead. “D-don't be scared,” he murmured, his *R*s soft and childlike.

Will tried to steady his hands and reach out, the nervous energy of the fluttering man behind him not helping at all.

“*Slowly”*.

He drew his bottom lip in between his teeth and took a tentative step through the straw at his feet, thankful that Hannibal had so graciously provided him with boots when he'd begun spending the afternoons outside. It had taken the destruction of several pairs of socks, and a few days of Will's resolve in not asking Hannibal for anything for fear of being at an even steeper disadvantage, but his captor had eventually left the brown leather waders at the foot of his bedroll for him to find.

“She's not that bad,” Peter insisted.

Will huffed his disagreement as he took his next slow step, which pulled a timid laugh from his friend.

Friend.

It had been twenty-three days by Will's count, since he had first met Peter. Fifteen since he'd mentioned Winston and discovered the key to his escape lay in the man's sympathy for animals. Perhaps it was wrong to refer to him as a friend, even within his own thoughts, when he spent each day guilt-tripping the man to sway him in favour of revealing the way out and inevitably putting himself in danger.

“So close-”

Will's cuffs scraped against the nesting box and the hen he had been hoping to nudge aside smoothly erupted into a cackling flurry of loose feathers and scraping nails. Will stumbled backwards into Peter who gasped as both men fell to the dirty ground.

Kevin looked down on them from his perch with piercing orange eyes.

“He's m-mad that we disrupted his l-ladies,” Peter spoke in a stage whisper, mouth hidden from the rooster with the back of his hand, and then got to his feet to help Will up, who, to his own surprise, was genuinely smiling.

They spent a few moments collecting the eggs from the now vacated nesting boxes before wandering outside to talk, as they always did, in the dirt. It was still fairly early in the day, Will had spent the morning surprising even himself with his progress on a piece by *Scarlatti*. The endless stream of sonatas were becoming a little dreary to him now, but he'd never

outwardly insult Hannibal's taste in music for fear of having the it taken from him. It wouldn't have to hurt though, to play the chords to something he could sing along to in his head.

Will wobbled unsteadily as he crouched, hands slipping out to steady himself against the damp mud that caked between his fingers and the links of the chain that kept the two cuffs together. He dug his feet into the earth and stared down at the restraints with the first real glimmer of anticipation. The morning routine hadn't changed even slightly since it had begun. Will was led in cuffs to Hannibal's room. There it would be Hannibal himself who uncuffed him, slipping the key into the inner pocket of his suit jacket. Hannibal would question him, Will would answer as little as possible. In frustration with his lacking replies, Hannibal would slip from his jacket, fold it neatly in half and place it on the arm of the banquette. That would be when he would relent, asking Will to practice whichever piece he wanted to listen to, and would do so with his eyes closed resting in tranquillity against the headrest of his bed, arms folded loosely across his body, only shifting to offer benign criticism or encouragement.

'Winston loved to play in the mud'.

It was easier to gouge the letters when the ground was damp. Will held his dirty hands up to Peter, after he had read the sentence, with a sad smile. The man's brow furrowed and he rolled his head into his shoulder.

“M-maybe Dr Lecter will send people for him, i-if you ask.”

Will shook his head and placed the stick to the squelching earth once again.

'I asked, there's a nest there.'

Peter's breathing hitched and he pulled his arms around himself.

“A n-nest by your d-dog. By Winston?” His speech was becoming more stuttered now from the stress of the information and Will looked down at his feet and willed himself to continue on the only viable path of escape, even with the distress it was causing.

He'd shared as much information on his furry friend as he could, so much so that Peter probably felt he knew him deeply himself, despite never having met him. He knew that Winston still bounded like a puppy when he ran, and that he huffed if Will pushed him off the bed too early in the mornings. When Will nodded in response, Peter inhaled deeply and squeezed his eyes shut, starting to shake.

“They'd c-come looking,” He managed in a voice even smaller than his usual murmur. “Hannibal will send V-verger after you as soon as he g-gets back.”

Will shook his head again, placing a hand on Peter's shoulder to grasp his attention.

'I'll get back before them' He wrote.

“You'll c-come back?”

Will's chest tightened at the hope in his friend's eyes then and the relieved slump of shoulders that accompanied it. He nodded once, feeling nauseous with his own betrayal.

It snowed the next day. Will could feel the chill in his cell, curled up on the bedroll under a heap of blankets that did little to ward off the biting cold. He brought his hands to the bend of his legs to warm them and burrowed further still beneath the fleece.

It was at least inconvenient, and at most entirely detrimental to Will's escape. It had been months, and the very idea that the elements could stand in his way now that everything was laid out so perfectly was beyond infuriating. Peter was finally coming around to the idea. Verger and Dolarhyde had yet to return and Hannibal seemed to have relaxed his guard considerably. It was now or never. The cold weather brought with it more bad luck as Hannibal did not seem to want to part with his jacket for the warmth it provided him, and once the key was slipped into his inner pocket it stayed safely nestled there, against his chest.

“Tell me Will, how have you settled in?” He was stood at the bookcase, running his finger along the spines of the hardbacks there to choose Will's next read.

It was something he took pleasure in, shaping his captive's mind with something so simple as the words he allowed him to pull from a page. The near-meticulous control over the things that influenced him was particularly enjoyable, made more so by the man's ability to stray from the course set out for him regardless. The escape attempt was accepted but not planned. Somebody else might have been shaped into perfect complacency by now, and how boring that would have been.

Will waited for him to turn before holding up his answer, *'it's not too bad'*.

Hannibal hummed in response, appreciating that Will was neither claiming contentedness nor distress. He suspected it was to stop him from becoming suspicious of Will's scheme, of which he was, of course, already fully aware. He turned back to his collection of novels, slipping once from its place on the shelf before changing his mind and placing it back.

“You've grown close to Peter.” It was hardly a question, but he turned so that Will would have to nod his agreement anyway.

Hannibal ignored the tinge of annoyance he felt that his captive had found solace in another, begrudgingly reminding himself that it was he who had pushed them together in the first place and that it would serve a purpose eventually.

“I'm not sure how the chickens will fare, this is the first snowfall in years,” He mused, not acknowledging Will's answer if he did indeed give one at all, as a particularly perfect novel caught his attention.

“Do you speak French, Will?”

'I can read more than I can speak', he wrote, before recognising the ridiculousness in that statement.

“Perfect,” Hannibal smiled and tapped one finger gently atop the image of the gently dishevelled naked woman that graced the cover. “This was originally published in German, but the French addition is fitting as the story takes place in Paris,” Hannibal made his way to the desk to place the book in front of Will and accepted his written thanks with a nod of approval.

'*Parfum*' The title read, and Will turned the cover over in his hands to study the blurb, happy that French flowed as naturally as it had the last time he'd used the language. He shuddered as the words sank in. The story of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, born with an absolute sense of smell and a sick fascination that inspired him to kill women and capture their scent in a perfume. As if on cue, Hannibal leant over him, so that his nose brushed against the side of Will's neck, and inhaled deeply.

'Did you just smell me?!' Will scribbled, underlining the words.

“Difficult to resist. Jean-Baptist and I have our strong sense of smell in common.” *Among other things*, Will wanted to write, but stilled his hand.

A strong hand rested on his shoulder then and Will tried not to think about the fact that he barely flinched at the contact anymore.

“You have all the time in the world to read about it though, I'd like you to practice something on the harpsichord, a piece of your choosing today.”

Will nodded and turned to slide from beneath Hannibal who was still positioned above him, stilling when the glint of silver caught his eye. From how he stood, his suit jacket hung open and the key was visible within the silk lined pocket there. Will felt his heart flutter in his chest with hope as he quickly decided on his next move. Such an opportunity could not be wasted and so as he twisted in the seat to stand, he hooked one foot beneath the leg of the chair, effectively tripping himself and stumbling into Hannibal's chest. Steady arms shot out to stop him from sliding to the floor and in doing so the key became even easier to reach. Will slipped a hand into the pocket, while the other landed distractedly on Hannibal's hip under the guise of trying to find purchase, before Will straightened and allowed the key to drop silently within his own sleeve. He didn't have to fake his fluster or force his face to go red when the exhilaration and awkward touching did the work for him. He bowed his head in mock embarrassment and apology both and the rest of the morning proceeded as any other, without the slightest inclination that Hannibal knew exactly what Will had done and why.

If Hannibal were honest with himself he was equally impressed and amused by his captive's actions. He had not disappointed him by trying to force his way free with the knowledge that he was outnumbered and would be easily overpowered. He had not tried to appeal to his better nature, reading at least enough of Hannibal's character as to know that no such thing existed. He had, in fact, bided his time until he had both an ally and some small leniency and the patience and planning was admirable. As he clicked the handcuffs into place around Will's wrists he allowed his thumb to trail along his pulse, feeling it accelerate beneath his touch.

“Enjoy your afternoon, Will,” He spoke softly, scooping 'Parfum' up from the desk and placing it firmly in his captive's hands. He knew full well that he'd not have the chance to

read it any time soon, reading was a privilege for those who behaved after all.

He looked into Will's eyes, holding his gaze for as long as the smaller man allowed, taking in the look of apprehension with the knowledge that the next time he peered into them they'd be wide and wrought with fear. He hummed appreciatively and allowed him to be on his way.

Once he was alone he sat at his harpsichord, key's still warm from Will’s fingers. It was only a matter of hours now. He briefly wondered how he had ever occupied his time before Will Graham came into his life. With a contented sigh, Hannibal allowed his fingers to dance along the keys, Burgmüller's 'The Chase' filling the room. An appropriate piece, unquestionably.

Chapter 11

The snow lay like a thick white blanket between the house and the coop, reaching halfway up Will's boots and crunching beneath his feet as he made his way towards Peter. It took every ounce of restraint not to run, as desperate as he was to make his move now, it could draw attention and suspicion. The sun shone despite the cold from the middle of the sky, half veiled by a cluster of clouds, if Will left it any later he'd not have enough hours of sunlight to find shelter upon escaping.

The air was cool and crisp, stinging Wills cheeks red and causing his breath to materialise like smoke from between his lips. He tried to pull his hands up into his sleeves, balling them into fists to get some feeling back into his fingers.

Peter was in the coop as expected, cupping his hands around his mouth to warm them. The chickens, and Kevin of course, were surrounding him, content to spend the day tucked among the warm straw in their nesting boxes. Stomping the snow from his boots at the door, Will allowed the key to slide from his sleeve into his hand and held it up for his friend to see.

“N-now?” Peter asked, eyes widening.

With a nod Will passed the key over to him, shaking his head 'not yet' as Peter began to fumble with the cuffs. If his hands were free while Hannibal was nowhere to be seen, the others would know something was amiss. Peter regarded the key for a moment, and Will worried he might back out of helping him after all, but finally he dropped it into his coat pocket and proceeded out into the snow.

It wasn't unusual for Will to be seen outside by Peter's side, but as he followed him to his freedom he couldn't help but feel as if his intent was obvious. The others had slowly grown use to Will's presence. Initially he had been nothing but a meal that had escaped their plates, and after that Will knew they saw him as an inconvenience, a possible threat to their way of life. Now though, he was certain that he had begun to fade into the background, like the bizarre choice of décor that blended into the rich wallpaper prints and dark panelled walls in the various rooms of the house.

He'd not been given a coat, and Will suddenly suspected that it was for this very reason. The fleece jacket he'd been provided instead would do little to ward off illness once he made it past the fence and had to spend several hours trekking optimistically towards the nearest shelter. He peered up at the sky, a hand over his eyes to protect them from the glare of the sun that refused to rest despite the time of year, and hoped beyond all hope that no more snow would fall until he had a new roof over his head.

He was surprised, and mildly agitated, when they did not walk in the direction of the fence. He was certain it could be the only way out, despite the hours upon hours he'd wasted trying to find it.

Instead, they headed towards the house and Will felt his chest tighten at the thought that maybe

Peter had been recounting their conversations to Hannibal all along, and he was in fact heading back to the mouth of his own personal hell to be punished or, better yet, killed.

His fear only quadrupled when they stopped outside of the basement, waiting for Lounds to pass by, before Peter hurriedly pushed the door open and herded him in. Will hesitated at the top step as Peter clicked the door shut quietly behind them. He then flicked the switch next to the door and the lights buzzed to life revealing that the basement was empty apart from the two of them. Will had half expected Hannibal to be awaiting them, knife in hand and chain dangling readily for him.

“C-come on-” Peter urged, wringing his hands together as he descended the staircase and began to cross the tiled floor below.

Will did as he was told, no other option now than to trust, regardless of the outcome. His palms were sweaty and he dragged them across his shirt before holding them out to Peter so that he could finally uncuff him. They had not been too tight, Hannibal never caused him discomfort in that way, but he rubbed at his wrists out of habit and nervous energy anyway.

Looking around, he could not see any reason for them to be there. He could tell now by Peter's own nervous demeanour and hasty movements that he had not turned Will over, but there were no doors in the basement, other than the one that led to the main house.

“I'll n-need your help-” Peter's voice was quieter now and even more shaky than usual.

He stood at the side of one of the tall metal cabinets that Will had assumed held Hannibal's various torture devices, and possibly Katharine's ice picks, leaning against it with his hands pressed flat to the cool surface. Will moved to aid him immediately, heart racing in his chest as the scenario unfolded in his mind before he'd even begun to push the piece of furniture aside.

The steel cupboard screeched across the tiles in a way that made Will's teeth ache and he tensed, wondering if anybody above them had heard the noise. As he expected, the cabinet had been concealing a door, and Will felt his breath escape him as Peter pulled it open and stood aside to let him pass.

“You'll come b-back?” He asked, in a voice so innocently hopeful that Will felt guilt pool in the pit of his stomach, letting it grow inside of him with the knowledge that he deserved it, for this at least.

He swallowed once and nodded, forcing a small smile.

He was about to leave the cold basement behind when he faltered, glancing back past Peter to the cabinet they'd moved together. To his surprise it was not locked, and he flung the doors open quickly to scan the contents.

He was met with row upon row of knives, some obviously for carving through muscle and flesh and others with more mysterious purposes. He'd been right about the icepicks too, swaying from the fitting from which they hung, because of the force with which Will had opened the doors. At the bottom of the cabinet, in a metal basket, he spotted his gun.

Relief flooded through him, only to be replaced with frustration when he realised the clip was empty and there were no bullets in sight. He slipped the weapon, redundant as it was, into the back of his trousers anyway and selected one of the larger knives. It wasn't even close to as efficient as his 9mm but at least he'd have some way to defend himself if they caught up to him.

He nodded one last goodbye to his friend, only to be pulled into a hesitant hug, and stepped through the door, knife glinting in his hand as he turned the blade over to examine it. The cabinet screeched back into place behind him, there was no backing out now.

Beyond the door was a tunnel only a little wider than Will and lit with flickering orange panels affixed to the curve of brown brick a few feet above his head. The ground was smooth, solid cement and his footsteps echoed ahead of him as he broke into a jog and then a sprint.

There was a damp smell that increased as he ran, and the further he went the sparser the bricks became. Soon the surroundings resembled a natural cave rather than something man-made. The floor and walls were jagged rock and he had to slow his pace not to trip. It would have been fairly pathetic to impede his own escape by falling and concussing himself.

After perhaps a few hundred metres, the rocky ground became soft and muddy under foot and Will emerged into the sunlight, leaving the horrors of the house behind him. He inhaled deeply, as if the ice-cold air beyond the fence was fresher, and looked back to find that he'd been walking a gradual decline, and the fence, and what could be seen of the house, was sat ominous on a slope above the snow dusted treetops.

Seeing it there he shuddered, picturing Hannibal only now hearing of his escape and how Peter would suffer if his part in the act was discovered. It didn't bear thinking, and with a glance to the sky Will realised he did not have the time to stand around and ponder the consequences. It was the middle of Winter, and the sky would turn black quicker than ever.

He set out through the small clusters of trees, hoping he'd find a road, or even a trodden path to lead him to shelter. With each step away from his prison the weight on his chest grew lighter, still, he couldn't help but see Hannibal's face when he closed his eyes.

He pictured his captor sat alone at the harpsichord, a solitary figure cut against the trickle of sunlight from between the plank-covered window. It was wrong to feel even a slither of guilt for leaving him, but Will was prepared for it anyway. He shook his head as if to clear the image from between his ears and reminded himself of the intricacies of captor bonding.

It wasn't long at all before Will heard a familiar voice and, ducking behind a thick cluster of bushes, he cursed Hannibal for sending men after him so hastily. Only when the source of the voice came into view did Will's stomach drop. Nobody had been sent to retrieve him yet, but Mason, Dolarhyde and their friends were returning from their supply run, two new captives bound in zip ties and gagged with cloth, trodding behind them.

He held his breath as they approached, scanning the bedraggled man and woman who had long ago given up weeping and begging for release and now stared into the distance as if they could see something the others could not.

Knowing their fate would not likely be as kind as his own, Will itched to leap out and save them. But the sneer on Mason's lips as he tugged them harshly along and Dolerhyde's obvious strength stopped him. The snowy ground was cold against his knees and the brisk air had already begun to prick through his inadequate clothing. He shoved his hands into his trousers pockets so that his fingers might no sting so much but it did little to help.

He apologised silently to them both as he turned to run again, knowing he would be seen if they got any closer. However there was a loud *snap* as a branch broke underfoot and he dropped to the floor again as all heads whipped round to his hiding place.

“Who's there?” Mason called, voice raising in pitch with his excitement.

“Verger, it's probably a damn squirrel or something, can we just get back. I'm starving.”

Hampson, a broad shouldered man with dark skin and hair spoke, sharing an exasperated look with Dolarhyde.

Mason didn't pay the man's protest any mind, handing the bound hands of the woman to him before skulking forward, his sneer becoming something more sinister still. Will swallowed, feeling his breathing quicken and hoping he wouldn't hyperventilate before he even had a chance to defend himself. His hand shot out for the knife, grasping the handle so tightly his knuckles turned white.

“Ready or not-” Mason practically cooed, inching closer to the bushes that would do nothing to protect Will now. He lifted the knife, ready to pounce, he'd at least go down fighting.

“Here I *COME*-”

Will lurched forward as the leaves of the bush were parted, dragging the blade across Mason's face in a thick bloody line that resembled something close to a chelsea smile. The man let out a gargling scream, thrashing with his own weapon, a glock, and managing to bring it down across the back of Will's head.

The impact had him reeling and he fell face first into the snow, the frigid ground leaving his cheeks red raw. His glasses were propelled from his face to land somewhere out of sight. He dug his hands into the white surrounding him, pulling back when the snow became crimson slush where Mason had folded over to bleed. Everything blurred but his sight wasn't so bad as to be debilitating.

He took his chance and swung a fist, landing a hit against the already tattered flesh of the man's cheek. It was only a temporary victory however and Dolerhydes foot came down against his back hard enough to wind Will entirely. Mason was towering over him too, dripping blood against Will's curls.

He felt his ribs scream out at the pressure, his chest and stomach burning from the contact with the cold ground and then Masons foot ploughing into his nose and he could have passed out for the pain. A steady trickle of blood was warm against his lips now and he scrambled beneath the hold one last time before giving in and lying limp in agony.

“I'll *kill* you!” Mason managed to slur, but a firm hand stopped him.

“Verger, he's Lecter's, you know you can't.” Hampson again.

Mason practically howled in anguish, bringing his foot down again, this time hard enough to send Will to his side where he folded in on himself in an attempt to protect his face and stomach from the worst of the blows that were raining down on him.

He whimpered when they finally stopped, just a bloody and bruised heap, and felt himself shivering despite a total numbness to the cold. He was sodden, in blood and water both, and as he was hauled to his feet he stumbled and had to be supported by Dolarhyde who was already ziptying his wrists behind his back, tight enough to cut off his blood flow entirely. Mason swung for him again then, waiting for him to right himself before spitting blood across his face.

Will dreaded going back, now more than ever that he had betrayed Hannibal's trust in trying to leave. He mouthed the word 'no' silently over and over, a tear cutting through the drying blood on his cheek.

“No need to gag this one,” The fourth man, who's name Will had yet to learn, laughed as he approached, dragging the captive man behind him. “And look how dazed he is, Pimms will be livid.”

“Pre-lobotomised,” Dolarhyde muttered, shoving Will forward only to have to reach out and stop him from crumbling to the floor again. Will's vision was blurring at the edges as he looked up at the house awaiting him. He hoped that if he passed out, he wouldn't have to wake again.

~

Hannibal watched from his uncovered window as they approached. He had seen his men returning just as Will left his room, as was the advantage of being located atop a hill. The timing was almost too perfect, he could not have planned it better himself and he was thankful that he had not been the one to have to pursue Will. The cruelty he would suffer at Mason's hands would only drive him further into Hannibal's clutches, though a part of him resented the very thought of the man laying a hand on what was his.

They were nearly at the entrance to the tunnel now, and Will was stumbling and bloody, an elegant mess. His hair hung damp and bloodied against his beautifully beaten face and Hannibal could not help but admire the way the dark red contrasted against Will's porcelain skin. A more pleasant surprise still was deep gash than ran along the width of Mason's face. So rude, that one. Hannibal's chest swelled with something close to pride for his captive as he turned to meet them in the basement.

Chapter 12

It had been three days since Will's escape attempt. They've dragged remarkably slowly for Hannibal, who missed the man's company terribly, but it was a necessary evil. He had to fear re-capture above his initial confinement and three days in total darkness would do the trick nicely. Upon reaching the basement, he was greeted with a beautifully unconscious and malleable body, Francis explaining that he had passed out in the tunnel, much to his ire at having to carry him back up the rocky incline.

Hannibal had had to see to Mason's injury first, for show only, he longed to strip Will of his clothing and see the extent of the damage up close. Once he was done stitching the man's face back together, all while ignoring the other's assertions that Will be put to death and use thereafter, he had Will to himself. That was, other than the presence of the two new victims, terribly rude as it was that Hannibal leave them waiting, it was entirely necessary.

They cried and screamed against their gags in vain, so much so that he had Katherine brought down to silence them. As she pierced the icepick past the eye of the whimpering man, hushing him as she tapped it into place with a dainty metal hammer, Hannibal unfolded a gurney he had stored in the far corner and lay Will out across it. The newly lobotomised outsider slumped in his restraints, swinging lightly as Katherine turned her attention to the woman and Hannibal listened to her curse through the cloth in her mouth as he ran a hand along Will's ribs carefully, checking for broken bones. He let out a gentle sigh of relief when he had ascertained that his captive was battered and bruised but in one piece beyond that. Even his nose, bleeding as heavily as it was, was straight and unbroken. He took his time to cup Will's face gently in both hands to examine it as the woman slumped alongside her companion behind him and the bodies began to swing in tandem.

"There," Katherine murmured, coming to stand by his side, "no more fear."

She watched him intently for a few moments as he ran his fingers through Will's bloody hair with an undeniable fondness.

"I could, if you want-" Katherine whispered, motioning with her tools towards Will's swollen eyes.

As much as Hannibal admired the woman's willingness to alter the minds of everyone she could, it was Will's wit and ability to survive that interested him. A pliant, docile *pet* was not what he desired.

"He would be more peaceful, better behaved." Katherine added, mistaking his silence for an admission and taking a step towards the sleeping man.

Hannibal reached out a hand to stop her. She sighed, lowering her pick and looked up at him.

“You may take one, for now.” Hannibal nodded towards the two figures slumped over the grate, to appease her. “For your bees,” he added, indulging her with a partially genuine smile.

“Please tell Frederick to bring some warm, soapy water down when you see him.” He called after her, as she ascended the stairs.

He'd washed him with a cloth, Will still pleasantly supple in sleep, admiring the scatter of purple blossoming across his abdomen, neck and face. Both eyes were puffy and turning an alarming shade of blue-black, it was a shame, he'd have to tell the others to avoid his face if he escaped a second time. He rested on a hand against Will's forehead, no fever, though the combination of his injuries and the cold would have put him at risk of a lowered immune system. The water warmed him some, and Hannibal soon had him dressed in a set of dry clothing, practised as he was at manipulating uncooperative bodies. It was almost a shame to see him go, carried off to his room by two of his men who had been told to remove everything other than the bucket and switch off the light. Will would wake terrified and in agony, an effective deterrent indeed.

He waited for the door to click shut at the top of the stairs before replacing the gurney, removing a bone saw from his cabinet and turning to the woman still swaying from the ceiling. “Sha'll we begin?”

~

Will had thrown his fists against the door at first, over and over again until his knuckles were as sore as the rest of him. He'd have flung his head against it too if the entire top half of his face wasn't throbbing so much already. Prodding gently at the swelling he flinched away from his own touch. One eye was damaged to such an extent that it had swollen closed entirely, not that it made much difference to is sight when the light was off. *God,* he needed the light back. He could feel himself unravelling already, hands shaking as what he could make out of the walls curved in on him. He'd sat with his forehead resting against the door at first, sobbing pitifully, until he'd remembered what he'd done to Mason's face and he scrambled to his familiar far corner to curl in on himself. *Please, please, please, let me out.* He repeated the words over and over in his mind, willing Hannibal to somehow hear them and come to retrieve him so he could throw himself at his feet and implore silently that he might have the light back. Just that, no blankets, no time out of his room, just the light so that he might maintain some semblance of his sanity. He would grovel if he could, he knew now that Hannibal had been merciful with him. He took to rocking with his arms wrapped tightly around his knees, a meek effort to soothe himself. Some hours later his sorrow turned to rage and he kicked his bucket in a fit, fists clenched as he ignored the splash of urine, hoping it would seep under the door so that he might cause at least a small inconvenience. If anyone noticed they made no effort to right the situation, and Will wretched as his own urine soaked into the floorboards, knowing he only had himself to blame. Eventually sleep found him, brief and fitful as it was.

A slither of light woke him and his heart lurched, but the door only opened a crack- two water bottles rolling through his mess towards him- and then slammed shut once more. He might have screamed, if he could. His throat was sore enough that it felt like he had been doing so, for hours. He drew his hands into his sleeve as he unscrewed the lid to the first bottle, not letting the rim touch his lips. He gulped quickly, only to sputter when the water seared like acid down his throat. He had been kicked in the neck while on the ground, there was no doubt about it. Melancholia, broken only by the odd self-deprecating outburst, filled the days that stretched out like weeks from that point on. One moment he was considering biting into his own wrists so that he could end it once and for all and the next he was tugging at his own hair with the need to get out and cripple each and every one of his captors. When the door finally slid fully open, the light flickering on above him to illuminate Hannibal's face, he felt unlike himself, almost sub-human. But he also felt relief as light flooded his senses and he gazed up at the man who had given it him.

~

Hannibal had positively *itched* to take the next step with Will, watching from the front door, only opened a crack, as the sun set and darkness reigned. He stood outside the entrance to Will's little room for a few moments, listening to the shaky breaths from within. He wasn't sure what he expected. Will had not eaten for three full days but he might still have enough strength for one futile attempt at attack. Hannibal pressed a hand silently against his door as he often had in passing over the last few days, and imagined instead that Will were a whimpering mess, crumpled and filled with rancour for Hannibal's treatment of him.

What he found was, in actuality, far better than either of the two scenarios he had entertained. Will was indeed crumpled in the corner, and his hands were certainly clenched in a way that suggested anger- but when his eyes adjusted to the light and he looked up through shaggy hair, his face was a picture of relief and...*gratitude.* He hesitated for only a moment, hands shaking and eyes unblinking, before shuffling forward and timidly resting his forehead against Hannibal's leg; in a way that was both an apology and a silent plea not to be shut away again. Hannibal felt his heart flutter with the utter perfection of it all but schooled his expression to one of unmitigated animosity.

“I have fed you and kept you sheltered-” Hannibal felt Will tense as he began to speak, “-I've deigned to share my own personal space and belongings with you.”

Will shuddered at his feet, lifting his head from its place against his calf and shrinking away from him. Hannibal didn't allow it, bending swiftly to grasp one of Will's wrists tightly and ignoring his urge to reach out and stroke the man's hair from his eyes. He crouched so that he was at eye level with his captive before speaking again, in the same emotionless voice as always.

“Friends do not come easily in this world, Will. I shared with you a rare gift, and you did not want it.”

Will made one last attempt to tug his wrists free, only to be hauled to his feet by it. He swayed unsteadily and would most likely have fallen if Hannibal didn't cuff him then and place a hand to the small of his back. They made their way into the basement, where Will eyed the familiar chain and swallowed nervously. Hannibal allowed the tension to build, appreciating the unmistakable scent of fear -beneath urine and sweat - that wafted through the otherwise sterile room, before moving to the cabinet. Will flinched on the spot, no doubt expecting Hannibal to retrieve one of the many knives he must have seen the last time he was conscious in the room, but he didn't try to run. He was too intelligent to believe he could gain the upper hand in such a circumstance. A frightened wheeze escaped his throat as the cabinet screeched beneath Hannibal's hands to reveal the tunnel, and then again as he approached him and began to lead him into it. His eyes flicked to Hannibal's face in confusion.

“If you want to be free of me so badly, then you may as well be.” His voice echoed off of the walls and Will could sense the thread of duplicity in his words.

He tried not to allow himself to hope, it couldn't all be that easy after all. Will walked half a step ahead of Hannibal who supported him with a hand at his back. Together they made it through to the second half of the tunnel, Will stumbling several times on the jagged ground to be caught by the man behind him.

“Almost there,” Hannibal said after a time.

Will squinted ahead of them, there was no sign of natural light and though he could feel the rocky ground softening beneath his feet he couldn't see it the way he had been able to before. Hannibal had confiscated Will's boots so that only a thin layer of cotton separated his feet from the aching cold as they stepped out from the shelter of the tunnel and into three inches of thick snow.

Will froze. He tried to lean back into Hannibal, but was forced forward, stumbling out into the open where he spun to face his captor, eyes wide and pleading. Overhead the sky was black apart from a few mocking stars. There were no screeching demons silhouetted against the moonlight, but still, Will tried to dart around Hannibal towards the tunnel, only to be stopped when his captor reached out an arm, looping it around his already bruised abdomen. Will tensed from the painful embrace, shaking his head wildly as Hannibal motioned for him to walked onwards. Hannibal had a loaded gun in the back of his suit trousers and was certain there were no nests nearby, but there was no way for Will to know that. He could only assume that he was being led to his death, some sort of offering to the monsters. Oh, the horrors he had described during their time together. Hannibal watched Will's eyes flick from side to side and up to the sky over and over, breath quickening to a pace that suggested an oncoming panic attack.

“This is what you wanted, Will.” He wondered if his words were getting through to the hyperventilating man before him, so spoke a little louder, “To be free of me, free of my protection.”

Will shook his head again, trying to turn to face his captor but finding himself held still, facing an ominous depth of forest with no light and no knowledge of his surroundings. He couldn't co-ordinate a way to safety, he couldn't even see where he was going. The demons would find him, they'd burn him alive and rip his limbs from him in the battle to consume his

flesh. Suddenly, his little room with the light and the bedroll, blankets and books didn't seem so horrendous and he hung his head and began to cry. Hannibal allowed him to sink down into the snow, observing him slumped at his feet for a few moments before turning to leave. He'd wait just within the tunnel, allow the situation to truly sink in, allow Will to cry, scared and cold and alone and then he'd go back for him. Lesson learnt. He'd seen the black frame of Will's glasses protruding from the white ground and made a mental note to retrieve them too. He heard the crunching of snow behind him and turned to see Will getting up to follow after him.

“No.”

Will stilled.

“You've made it perfectly clear what you think of me and my home. You are not welcome, Will.”

He watched long enough to see the man crumple in on himself again, body wracked with sobs, before making his way back to the tunnel. Other than the sound of crunch beneath Hannibal's feet, it was silent. Snow began to fall in large, round flakes that landed in his hair and against the well-preserved fabric of his suit jacket. He was only inches away from the entrance of the tunnel when a small, quivering voice broke through the quiet.

“*Hannibal-*”

He turned to find his captive on his knees, and though he couldn't make out much in the dark, he could see that shaking hands were extended out towards him. This had not been the plan. This was decidedly *better* than his plan. The fact that Hannibal's name was the first word from Will's mouth in *years* was not lost on him. He returned to the terrified man and crouched in front of him, reaching out a hand to cup a cold, ruddy cheek. He avoided the bruising there, stroking close to his jaw line. Will didn't flinch away.

Instead he parted chapped lips to speak again.

“*Please?*”

Chapter 13

“You killed him!”

Peter had dropped to the floor, body shaking with sobs upon discovering the bloody, headless corpse.

“You killed him,” He repeated, quieter this time, running a hand over crimson feathers before pulling it back to view his own bloodstained fingers.

He shook his head, shoulders twitching with the overwhelming stress of finding Kevin decapitated amongst the straw.

“Yes,” Hannibal answered calmly, stepping over the dead-eyed, sodden head at his feet.

He briefly wondered if crushing it beneath his heel might get the message across more clearly, but looking at the anguished man, still whispering 'you killed him' over and over as if they were the only words he knew, he could see his point had been made. He left Peter to mourn and consider his treachery, hatchet dripping to turn the white snow red, as he returned to the house.

Will was as he had left him the night before, sat rigid against the back wall of his little room, ignoring the bedroll and books that had so graciously been returned to him, to huddle beneath the blankets as far from the door as he could instead. His eyes widened slightly as he took in the weapon in Hannibal's hands, the only indication he had seen the man at all.

“Come here,” Hannibal stepped aside for Will, who only shook his head and sunk further below the blankets.

He sighed, clicking the door shut and taking the hatchet to the basement to later be washed. When he returned he spoke more firmly.

“Will, *come here*.”

Will didn't refuse a second time, standing reluctantly, blanket sliding to the floor as he did. When he was seated at the desk in Hannibal's room, he opened the top drawer to retrieve the paper and pencil that always awaited him there, only to find it empty. He turned to his captor with a questioning glance.

Hannibal smiled, a small, genuine upturn at the corner of his lips.

“Dear Will, we both know you no longer need that.”

Of course, Hannibal was aware of the fact that his captive most likely *did* still need the paper. That his speech had been a momentary survival mechanism in the face of abandonment and

death, but regardless, Hannibal would have him speak again. Perhaps even take him out at night again in the same pretence as the last time, if it came to it. For now though, less drastic measures could be taken.

“If you need something, Will, you will have to *ask* for it” Hannibal said, placing a bottle of water by his hand. “Drink.”

Will needed a large number of things, or rather he needed to *know* a large number of things. A thousand questions were racketing inside of his skull and the frustration at not being able to ask them had him almost glowering at his captor. But in that moment he simply drank the entire bottle of water, as asked, and joined him at the harpsichord.

There was a bizarre calm between them that Will had not anticipated. It had been merely hours since Hannibal had decided not to leave him to die, and he had expected to be thrown back into the darkness, spoken down to and maybe beaten. Instead, Hannibal had soaked and bandaged his battered knuckles with surprising tenderness, in a way that made Will feel almost embarrassed for having flung his fists against the door of his room in the first place. He had remembered the state in which Hannibal had found him, peering up with red-rimmed eyes from a puddle of his own urine, and felt his cheeks and neck burn red. He didn't play today, fingertips still raw from digging gouges in the door, and instead sat at Hannibal's side to listen. He could not concentrate though, wondering if Peter had been linked to his failed break out. He doubted very much that he'd be allowed to tend to the chickens with his friend as usual once Hannibal was done with him, and so he had no way to know. The worry built inside of him as the classical music faded to the background and the image of *Soupe de Peter* filled his mind.

His eyes were still swollen and most of his body still sore to the touch, he had looked into the mirror in Hannibal's bathroom to see that his bruises were yellowing, but he knew he would be in considerable pain for at least a week more. Worse still, *Verger* would be in considerably *more* pain as well as scarred for life. If he'd wanted to hurt Will before, he could only imagine what he'd like to do to him now. He needed to *ask* Hannibal if Verger would be able to get to him.

The morning stretched on into the afternoon, and Will found himself unabashedly relieved to be in Hannibal's company, perhaps the one place he was truly safe from the others. Hannibal who had given him light, Hannibal who had forgiven him for trying to leave, Hannibal who had washed the dried blood gently from his knuckles and hushed him as he stroked a thumb over the fresh bandages there. He wanted to be free, he really, truly did, but somehow he had forgotten the horror of the outside world. The terror that came with the night, the monster's screeching, the constant hunger that Hannibal would never allow him to feel so long as he acted a little grateful for what he had been given. Conflicted, he shook the thoughts from his head, turning his attention to the building pressure in his lower abdomen instead. He shifted uncomfortably, looking towards his captor and biting his lip. Hannibal turned to face him too and tilted his head.

“Is there something you need, Will?” He asked, a hint of smugness in his words.

Will looked pointedly to the en-suite, where Hannibal had fitted his own bedpan into the toilet bowl to afford himself some illusion of normalcy.

“No?” Hannibal raised his eyebrows and turned back to his instrument, leaving Will to cross his legs and hope for the best.

In that moment the sharp, steady sounds of the harpsichord seemed to resemble water droplets and Will began to wonder if Hannibal had chosen that particular piece of music deliberately. He licked his lips, trying to remember how he had spoken the night before, but only a small sigh sounded.

Hannibal stopped playing upon noticing the man's struggle and turned to face him expectantly.

“Yes?”

Will fisted his hands in his lap and turned to the bathroom again, eyes pleading when he looked back at Hannibal, only to be met with mock confusion from his captor who seemed to almost enjoy the struggle he was witnessing. He worked his jaw, huffing when he couldn't form any words. The tension in his bladder became a little more desperate and he squeezed his thighs together, willing himself not to sully the beautiful velvet bench he so often shared with his captor. He mouthed the words instead, hoping it would be enough for now, that Hannibal would value his possessions enough to not want them soiled.

“I'm sorry Will, I can't quite hear you. Could you speak a little louder please?”

Time was certainly of the essence now, and Will felt sweat bead on his forehead as a sensation not unlike cramping began spreading through his stomach and crotch. From sheer frustration he managed to emit a small sound, a whine of distress more than anything. He sounded dim witted, but the words were there in his head, and the ability to string them into a coherent sentence had once been there too. The connection between those two parts was what was lacking. Hannibal leant a little closer at the sound, as if encouraging more from him. His mocking air was gone now and he seemed to be willing his captive on more than anything. He could speak, he *had* spoken. Had said Hannibal's name of all things. He wracked his brain for the ability, brows furrowing and formed a '*p*' with his lips.

“P-p-” He felt his cheeks flush red, with the humiliation of resembling an infant attempting to gurgle its firsts words.

Worse was the way Hannibal's eyes widened incrementally, as if watching a dog preform a particularly challenging trick.

“P-please,” He managed, hoping his good manners would be enough, and upon realising they would not, managed one more word, “b-bathroom.”

The words felt clumsy and strange coming from his own mouth but it hardly mattered when Hannibal nodded his permission. Will could have cried, leaping from the chair and barely reaching the toilet or unfastening his buttons before emptying his bladder with a contented sigh.

He felt so relieved upon returning to the bedroom that he couldn't even muster the will to feel patronized by Hannibal obvious pleasure.

“Well done, Will. You've made measurable progress.”

He sank beside his captor, resisting to urge to lean against him and dissolve into a fit of bitter laughter with the knowledge that this was really what his life had become. Considerably comfortable confinement and praise for asking permission to take a piss. And it *was* his life. He knew that now. He had failed to escape, and when he had finally made it outside of the walls the second time around, he had *begged* to be allowed back in. He let his head drop to his chest and sighed; the type of sad little noise that came with accepting one's fate.

“You'll need to keep speaking, Will.” Hannibal said, recalling the years of his childhood where he himself suffered with mutism. His voice cut through the silence after a short while and when Will turned towards him, he was looking down on him with a distant sort of affection. “It would be untenable to allow yourself to slip back into silence now that you have made so much improvement.”

Will nodded slowly, though the idea that he might speak now, and often, seemed foreign to him

still.

“The word is *yes*, Will.” The tone of mocking, or perhaps it was the cannibal's attempt at jesting, had returned to his voice and Will's jaw tensed.

“I know the words, I just can't *say* them.” It was quiet, just louder than a whisper really, and Will's voice cracked as he spoke. But still the sentence was more than Hannibal had expected so early on, and he found himself genuinely smiling down at the man he had so prudently decided to keep.

“Actually, it would appear you *can*.” Hannibal made no attempt to hide the delight he felt at this new development.

Will looked through his lashes and smiled, almost sheepishly at his captor, before quickly flicking his eyes back to the floor and schooling his expression.

“Don't get too happy,” He mumbled, words fading out to near silence at the end of the sentence, “this just means I can tell you to fuck off.”

Hannibal sighed, mouth drawn taut in displeasure, but he recognised the remark for what it was; a rebuttal at having let his guard down around his captor.

“I suppose it does,” Hannibal kept his voice even, noticing the tension in Will's body language that suggested he regretted his own choice of words, “however I suspect you have other things you would like to say. Perhaps to inquire after your accomplice?”

Will's breath caught in his throat, eyes scanning his captors face for a bluff and finding nothing that could assure him either way. Peter had been found out, of course he had, he was the only friend Will could name. In that moment the outcome seemed obvious, and in a trembling voice Will began to speak.

“Is he d-”

“Very upset about the loss of his rooster?” Hannibal cut him off and found, to his surprise, that he relished the look of utter relief he received. Whether it was for the happiness his captive felt, or that he himself had the power to cause and curb such emotions, he couldn't say. “Yes, I would say he is.”

Will couldn't stop the flood of gratitude that overcame him then, knowing that, despite Peter's love for his birds, it was an incredibly small price to pay when Hannibal could easily have taken so much more.

“Thank you.” He managed, and didn't pull away when Hannibal placed a hand to his shoulder.

And then before he could stop himself, or even think the words through, he spoke again.

“I'm sorry.”

His brow creased as, for a brief moment, something at the back of his mind tried to remind him that *he* shouldn't be sorry at all. But the words had already been received and Hannibal's hand had travelled to the side of Will's face in an affectionate gesture.

“It is forgiven, Will.”

Hannibal began to play, the warmth of the touch suddenly gone from Will's face, and as the music began to lull him Hannibal spoke.

“But don't let it happen again.”

Chapter 14

'He succeeded in being considered totally uninteresting. People left him alone. And that was all he wanted.'

Will read the line again, and considered how well it described the person he had once been. Uninteresting, at least in passing, with his eyes cast to the floor or his phone or a book. At least on the outside, with glasses and uncombed hair to cover his face and loose-fitting plaid to cover his body. At least in conversation when he refrained from mentioning his particular skill in briefly taking on another's thoughts, feelings and urges.

It wasn't possible to maintain his dreary exterior where Hannibal was concerned though, even if not for the fact that Will's right to exist depended on his ability to intrigue his keeper. Hannibal picked and peeled at him, often covertly taking more than Will had intended to offer. Worse still, he had carved himself a space in Will's life, or rather hacked away at everything else until only he remained.

Will folded the lip of the book's dust jacket between the current pages and placed it beside himself, nestling further into his blankets where he sat against the far wall. It was early evening, Will knew because he had spied the sun setting through the slats across Hannibal's window, just before he had been returned to his room.

They had been talking, Will was quickly becoming use to sound of his own voice again, and no longer cringed when he heard himself speak. Of what they spoke, he couldn't always recall in any detail, but he had been sat comfortably on the side of Hannibal's bed, no longer requiring a surface to write against in order to communicate and had caught himself feeling almost content.

They had eaten in the dining room, on Hannibal's insistence that Will infiltrate himself more fully with the rest of the household. Peter had looked up from his dish when they entered, only to avert his eyes with a furrowed brow and a slump of his shoulders when Will smiled apologetically. It wasn't enough, he needed to tell him how sorry he was but Hannibal hadn't let him out of his sight for six days and he didn't see it happening any time soon. He'd glanced over at his once-friend multiple times only to find him still slumped and avoiding looking towards the two men responsible for Kevin's death. It had made his stomach twist, to see how badly he had hurt the man who had been nothing but kind to him.

Perhaps he'd wallowed in his guilt, perhaps that was why Hannibal had sent him back before it had even gotten dark. Maybe he had upset his keeper, maybe he should apologise to him as well, again-

Will shook his head. It was too easy to run away with his own thoughts when in his little room. Minutes stretched like hours in the tiny space, his own company lacking. He glanced down to the book again but decided against reading any further for the time being. He didn't want to be JeanBaptiste again that night.

Perhaps he could get to sleep early. He pulled the blankets more tightly around himself and started to shuffle down the length of his sleeping roll-

The light was gone from his room suddenly and he couldn't help but let out an involuntary yelp.

He waited a second, two, for the door to open. Three, four- nothing. He felt his chest tighten and tried to control his breathing to no avail. Five-six-seven-

He'd upset Hannibal somehow, he reasoned, squeezing his eyes shut as if to convince himself that the darkness surrounding him was of his own making. Eight-nine-ten- He was being punished again. He couldn't survive another three days like it. Arms snaking around himself he began to rock, eleven-twelve-thirteen-

He flung his head back against the wall, fingernails digging and twisting into the flesh of his own forearms to ground himself, fourteen-fifteen-sixteen *Unless.*

His eyes shot open again, scanning the area where he knew the door was, even if he couldn't see it. He felt sick. Maybe Verger was just outside the door. He hadn't been in the dining room that afternoon, maybe he was biding his time until-

Seventeen-eighteen-nineteen-

The door clicked open on the twentieth second and Will let out a small whimper, tensing as if rolling into a ball would help when it had done nothing for him at the various schools he had attended as a child.

“Will?”

He let out a shaky breath, Hannibal's voice sounded from the equally dark hallway and when Will peered up from his cocoon there was only a small candle illuminating his face. The flickering orange light bounced from his cheekbones so that his hollowed features resembled a skull which did nothing to settle his shaking.

Hannibal placed the candle, complete with a brass, antique holder, in the corner of the room and crossed the space in one long stride so that he was crouching, level to Will. His breath was hot against his face.

“Please, Hannibal, I can't stay here again. I can't st-” Will shook his head fervently, only quieting when Hannibal cut him off.

“Will, please calm down and listen,” His voice was soothing and Will stilled his head to peer up through overgrown curls. “The generator has broken, you do not have to stay here. You may come back to my room.”

Firm hands were on his shoulders then, thumbs rubbing circles to ease the tension there until Will slumped enough that his head was resting heavy against Hannibal's chest. He didn't mind, partly reconciled to have another human there with him, anyone other than Verger.

He nodded, only then noticing that he had been crying. Cringing, he hoped the darkness had obscured how pathetic he must have appeared, at least a little.

Hannibal placed his knees to the floor so he was knelt more comfortably and allowed Will to lean into him, encouraging him with one hand cupping the back of his head until the man was almost cradled there in his arms.

Will couldn't muster the energy to care, he felt safe now. There was a candle, there were strong arms around him, he wasn't alone and Verger couldn't get to him when Hannibal had him like this. He wanted to say thankyou but when he opened his mouth only a strained little noise came out and Hannibal shushed him, burying his nose in the mess of curls that were tickling his chin and inhaling gently.

“I am sorry Will, this was unforeseen,” he ran his fingers through Will's hair, silently thankful for the opportunity to do so without protest from his captive.

It truly had not been planned, but Hannibal was thankful for the opportunity to foster more dependency in his captive.

Will leaned in closer, so that his tear-damp face was nestled in the fabric of Hannibal's vest, and felt the arms around him tighten minutely. He steadied his breathing and felt his pulse slow down and only then did Hannibal help him to his feet and extend an arm for Will to hold.

He led him that way, candle in hand, to the bedroom, savouring the tightness of Will's grip on his arm.

The halls were far busier than usual, the inhabitants hurrying in twos and threes, tiny flames casting menacing shadows up across the walls and roof. They were stopped in their tracks by the red headed woman Will had seen a few times before. She had sharp features, pretty but undeniably spiteful.

“The freezers?” She asked bluntly one brow raised as she glanced first to Will's blotchy face and then to his grip on Hannibal's sleeve. He lowered his head, thankful for the long curls that swept across his face to hide him from her scrutiny.

Hannibal cleared his throat, partly in irritation and partly to regain her attention.

“Freddie, have Cordell start the preparations,” As far as cooking was concerned, he was the only one Hannibal considered to be even close to his own standards. He had been a trained chef before, and Hannibal had been pleasantly surprised by his willingness to cook long-pig when he had invited him into his circle.

With a brisk nod Freddie turned on her heel to leave.

“Oh, and tell Peter i'd like to make Frittata,” Hannibal called after her, words carrying through the hall without him having to raise his voice at all. He received only another nod in acknowledgement, tight curls bouncing as she turned the corner to the kitchen, the click clack of her heels quietly discernible against the tile.

She could be awfully rude but, Hannibal mused as he led Will up the staircase, she had a knack for for knowing the goings on in the house and valued her life enough that she would share the details with Hannibal, and only Hannibal.

Several candles had already been lit and scattered across the surfaces in Hannibal's room. As the door shut behind them the din of voices and hurried footstep faded and Will slumped down onto the edge of the bed without an invite.

“Thankyou,” He murmured, letting his head drop to his chest.

“No need to thank me Will,” Hannibal said, placing the candle he had been holding on the desk and walking over to the window above the harpsichord to peer through the slats.

There would be noise tonight, best to check that their surrounding area was still clear of any nests. In the moonlight only the stretch of trees could be seen, and snow was falling heavy again from the starry sky.

Will lifted his head to glance around himself. In the candlelight the room was almost serene. The flames didn't cast formidable shadows but rather illuminated the artwork on the walls. It was warm and familiar and Will felt himself becoming sleepy, now that the stress of being left in the dark had subsided. Hannibal turned then, to see his captive's eyes drooping, and smiled.

“Are you tired, Will?”

He shook his head, running a hand down his face, afraid that he might be sent back to his room if he admitted he were.

“You can sleep here, if you'd like,” Hannibal spoke softly, stepping closer to ease Will back onto the bed with a firm hand.

He went easily, more obedient by the day, and gazed up at Hannibal with a furrowed brow as if he expected him to join him.

Soon. Hannibal thought, pulling the bed-runner up over Will since he was already laying heavy atop the quilt.

Will tugged it more tightly around himself. He didn't flinch when Hannibal sat on the edge of the bed beside him and placed a hand to his face, tracing his cheekbone with his thumb. Blue eyes strained to stay open, and there was a moment where confusion flickered across his features. Bewilderment, perhaps, that he could feel so comfortable beside his captor.

Will hadn't slept properly in almost a week, for fear that Mason would come to him in the night and pay him back for the thick slit in his cheeks. But in the luxuriously soft bed, tucked warm beneath a blanket and bathed in dim light, he couldn't help but drift off. Even as Hannibal caressed his cheek. If anything the repetitive touch only eased him more quickly into slumber.

“I-” He went to protest but the words died on his tongue.

“Hush,Will. Sleep now.”

And compliant as ever, he did.

~

There were preparations that required Hannibal's attention, but try as he might he couldn't quite tear himself away from the sleeping man in his bed. He was angelic, the dancing flames only highlighting the softness of his features. But beneath all that, there was the ever present darkness in the way his lips twitched and his eyes fluttered rapidly beneath his lids. All signs of the terrors conjured by his own mind in the night.

And he's mine, the thought was very pleasing indeed.

If only Will knew how far from danger he was. How, in Hannibal's eyes, he could never be uninteresting, could never be anything less than alluring, compelling-

As if to demonstrate, the man let out a quiet moan and twisted on the bed, unaware in his unconscious state that the blanket had slipped down to his hips and his shirt had hitched up in a way that revealed a teasing amount of curling dark hair from beneath the waistband of his trousers.

Hannibal clenched his fists, he was nothing if not self disciplined. As he pulled the blanket back up to keep the man decent he assured himself that he *would* have Will, in every way possible. But that he would be willing, that he would *beg* for it. It was enough, for the moment, to imagine the man writhing beneath him.

He placed his hand back where it had been at Will's cheek, mouth twitching as the sleeping man unknowingly sought out the touch, nuzzling into his palm.

“Oh, Will,” Hannibal breathed, leaning in to place a gentle kiss on his temple.

Eventually he stood, retrieving his candle from the desk so he could navigate his way to the kitchen. When he reached the door, he paused to look back at the head of curls peaking from beneath the blanket. He hoped the generator would be broken for quite some time.

Chapter 15

The kitchen was teeming with people when he did finally arrive. Too many people. With a curt gesture he sent half of them on their way and retrieved a large joint of meat from the quickly defrosting freezer. Water dripped out and trickled between the tiles and he made a note to have Frederick clean up when he was done. He did not have the means to carefully label and package the meat as he had done before, what with the lack of cling film and the general unwillingness of his victims to divulge their names, so he wasn't entirely sure *who* he was about to cook, but he did know that they would taste divine. He so rarely had an excuse to host a dinner party anymore, with rationing at the forefront of everyone's minds. Only when the generators decided to fail them did he have the opportunity to genuinely let his artistry flow. His fingers twitched with anticipation.

Cordell was busy at work, and Hannibal felt himself bristle a little at the way he carried himself, as if it were his domain and not Hannibal's. The man had an air of self-importance and smugness that Hannibal would not abide if not for his culinary skills. He placed the meat on a stainless-steel chopping board to allow it to thaw and began crushing the peppercorn from the plants that had only started bearing fruit that year. His thoughts remained with Will, asleep in his bed with just the ceiling separating them. Rarely did he struggle to submerge himself entirely in his cooking, but this was one such time.

Katherine entered then, sidestepping Freddie who was peeling the carrots that had been frozen for Winter at the island, to place a jar of thick, golden honey proudly before Hannibal on the counter.

“This one lived for *four days,”* She beamed, tapping the tin lid with brittle fingernails and studying Hannibal's face for approval.

Freddie grimaced behind her, having to steady her hand before going on to slice the other vegetables.

“That is decidedly impressive, Katherine,” He offered, twisting the lid free so that he could pair it with a suitable wine and make a glaze. “Where is he now?” he asked, trying to sound indifferent but dreading the waste of perfectly good food.

“That's him!” She laughed, almost sweetly, nodding towards the thigh currently defrosting.

It was poetic at least, Hannibal mused. To cook a man in the substance he had, in part, created.

The knife slipped from Freddie's hands behind them, landing with a clatter against the marble worktop, and Hannibal pondered over the fact that some of his guests would never truly make peace with the way they survived. She started to make haste with the rest of the vegetables, until Hannibal stepped in for fear that they would be sliced unevenly, and then excused herself from the kitchen with the lie that she was needed elsewhere for some trivial task.

When Katherine lingered, Hannibal thanked her for the honey and sent her on her way, unable to indulge her and prepare the evening meal simultaneously. Katherine was one of his favourites. Not in the way that he favoured Will, but in the same way he enjoyed Peter's company over Mason's or Cordell's. She had a unique outlook on life and death, one he could appreciate, and she was not at risk of turning against him in the way that some of the others were. She had found a certain harmony in the new state of the world that made her rather pleasant company on some occasions. After glazing the '*ham*' with the mixture of honey and wine and seasoning it with the crushed peppercorn, he slid it into the AGA, glad that it was a gas cooker and he could light it manually with a naked flame, and glanced up at the ceiling, wondering if Will was still blissfully asleep in his bed.

They had worked efficiently in the dim, wavering light for almost three of hours before Hannibal called some of the others in to lay the table, excusing himself to retrieve the guest of honour. It was far later than he would usually partake in a meal such as this one, but the circumstances called for it and he would enjoy it nonetheless. When upstairs, the door slipped open to reveal that Will was still very much asleep, the blanket pulled up to his chin, and breathing softly. Hannibal circled the bed and for a moment didn't wake him, content to see him free from a furrowed brow and hunched shoulders while he could. Will's lips were parted beautifully but his long, neglected facial hair obscured the image that would otherwise have been worthy of Botticelli. He decided then that the time had come to take his straight razor and reveal the beauty he knew lurked beneath. Although, it would have to wait until after the meal, as it was already cooling downstairs and the other's would want to start eating soon.

~

“This has become almost tradition now,” Hannibal explained to a rather sleep-mussed Will as he led him down the stairs. “This is not the first time the generators have failed, but each time we have reason to hold a feast of sorts.”

As they turned into the dining room, Will couldn't help but pause to take it all in. Spread along the length of the table, with candles dotted in between, were three large joints of plump, glazed meat, beautifully displayed on beds of thinly sliced red apples. Several other dishes held cooked carrots and swede, and a bright yellow frittata, and there were glasses laid out ready, most likely for wine.

With Hannibal present, the others started to filter in and take their seats, and Will ducked his head and shrank into himself a little at the sheer number of people. The table was set for sixteen, and Hannibal took hold of his arm and swiftly led him to the head of it, where he sat and planted Will in the chair beside him. Will's stomach gurgled at the sight of more food in one place than he had seen in years, but thankfully the others were so loud in their conversation that only Hannibal heard, and his eyes crinkled in the way that Will had come to read as genuine amusement. Everyone was taking their seats at the other end of the table, the space near Hannibal either clearly reserved or too daunting for most. Peter shuffled into view, sitting silently beside Frederick who had already launched into an obnoxious speech. Dolarhyde sat a little higher up, and Will avoided looking in his direction, but luckily Freddie sat beside him and the seat opposite remained empty. As nosey as the woman seemed, she was preferable to the array of sadists and psychopaths who could have taken the seat instead. Hannibal stood as a bottle of red wine was passed to him and cleared his throat.

“Sha'll I carve?” He asked the room, filling Will's glass and then his own before passing the bottle on and retrieving the carving knife.

“I think you already *have*, Hannibal.” Came the voice, speech still slurred, before Mason turned the corner to reveal himself.

Will glanced quickly at his face, noting the thick slits on either side of his mouth, stitched with black thread that couldn't possibly be medical grade. Hannibal must have had to make do. The dull light only served to make him look more frightening still, the reflection of the small flames scattered across the table dancing along with the anger in his eyes. His throat tightened, half expecting the man to lunge across the table and make good on his threats. Mason made a beeline for the free chair and Will tensed, gripping the side of the table. He'd rather not eat at all, than risk sitting across from the sadist he had permanently disfigured.

“Actually, Peter, if you would-” Hannibal held out a hand to stop Mason in his tracks and the room fell silent.

“*Oh*?” Mason spoke far louder than necessary, practically basking in the uneasy atmosphere he was creating.

Peter was peering from around Fredericks shoulder, gaze flickering between the two standing men, clearly hesitant to move.

“Do I spoil your *appetite,* Doctor?” Mason's voice was rising in pitch, Hannibal's hands tightened marginally around the knife handle. “It's *funny*, I've been finding it rather hard to *eat* recently *too!”*

Will could feel his own heart beating so loudly that he wondered if the others could hear it as well. He swallowed, not looking up from his empty plate and tried to keep his breathing steady, fully aware that they were all standing on shaky ground. The others were suddenly as mute as Will had been when he arrived, some glancing between the men and other's staring down at their plate, or passing worried looks to one another. Will didn't have to be an empath to know that Mason desired nothing more than to wrench the knife free and drive it into him over and over, or perhaps set him on fire and let him light up the room properly. After a few unbearable seconds Mason raised his hands in surrender.

“It's *fine*,” He exclaimed, “I'm *smiling* see?” He laughed at his own morbid joke as he made his way to Peter, who hurriedly vacated the spot. “I'm *always* smiling.”

The chair screeched along the floorboards as he took his place at the far end of the table, taking his knife and fork in his fists to bang them against the table like a petulant child. Hannibal inclined his head, deciding he had been far too lenient, and bent to carve the meat, the sound of voices and clatter of cutlery soon filling the room. Will forced himself to relax back into his seat, allowing Hannibal to fill his plate for him while he composed himself.

The chair across from him was pulled out silently and Will started, looking up to see Peter, head ducked as he took his seat.

“Thank you D-Dr Lecter,” He managed, rolling his head into his shoulder and wringing his hands.

“My pleasure, Peter.” He sounded far too pleasant for the man who had beheaded Peter's pet in front of him less than a week before.

An awkward silence stretched between the three of them. Will cleared his throat, trying to think of something to say.

“The Frittata is delicious,” Will mumbled, actively avoiding the meat, though Hannibal had afforded him a rather large portion of it.

“Thank you, Will,” Hannibal swilled his wine glass, raising it to his nose briefly before taking a sip. “Though the chickens are partly to thank.”

“Yes, how are they, Peter?”

Only when he looked up from his plate, did Will realise it was the first time he had spoken to Peter, or indeed anyone other than Hannibal, and in privacy. The man was looking at him, mouth agape.

“G-g-good,” He eventually said, though his eyes looked forlorn and Will could almost see the rooster's death playing out behind them.

“I'm sorry,” He spoke more quietly than he would have liked.

“It was your d-dog,” He reasoned, but he was standing from his seat. “M-may I b-be excused?” He asked belatedly. Hannibal nodded and the man scurried off.

“I shouldn't have used him,” Will murmured after a while.

Hannibal hummed his agreement and Will sank a little lower in his chair, quite literally weighed down by his guilt.

“Try the wine, Will.”

That drew his attention back from his own thoughts to the glass beside his hand. He huffed a small laugh, the absurdity of fine dining in his position finally dawning on him.

“I don't remember the last time I drank wine,” He confided, lifting the glass and swirling the dark red liquid the way he'd seen Hannibal do, though he wasn't sure why.

“It's an excellent vintage, though I can only offer you one glass I'm afraid.”

“It's-wow, it's really good,” He was still talking in a half-whisper, unwilling to be heard by the others. For that reason, he was particularly conscious of Freddie sat at his side - but she was already immersed in conversation with another.

“The ham is too, Will.” Hannibal mentioned pointedly.

Will bit his lip and cut into one of the slices Hannibal had carved for him.

“The whole point is to not let the food go to waste when the generators break,” He motioned with one hand to the others at the table, all enjoying the sheer abundance of food. All apart from Freddie, Will noted, who had opted for an entirely vegetarian selection. He hardly had to ask to know that the same choice wasn't available to him. Will let the morsels slide over his tongue and down his throat one at a time and, though he would not satisfy Hannibal by admitting it, it tasted sublime.

“What do you do, when the generators break?” Will asked, “If it's happened before I mean.”

“We did have an engineer among us,” Hannibal answered, holding a forkful of food suspended just above his plate, “Unfortunately he developed a brain tumour, there was nothing I could do for him. Now, we live by candlelight until the season changes and there are enough hours of sunlight for the solar panels to take over.”

Will watched him slip the meat between his lips and close his eyes to fully appreciate the taste. He found himself wondering if Hannibal had eaten the engineer or if the meat would have been tainted.

“I could try to fix it,” He offered quietly, pulling Hannibal abruptly from his reverie.

“You're an engineer?”

“Of sorts.” He bowed his head, embarrassed. He wouldn't have offered if he weren't so terrified by the thought of being left in the dark again. “Boat motors mostly, but I- I could try.”

Hannibal smiled, “I appreciate the offer, Will.” He briefly mused that giving Will a sense of purpose could only cement his place with him further. “I will show you where they are tomorrow.”

~

“I can sleep on the floor,” Will insisted as Hannibal peeled back the duvet to offer the space beside him in the bed.

“It would hardly do to have you sleeping on the floor, Will.” Hannibal patted the space next to him, thankful that Will was giddy enough on the one glass of wine to dull his anxiety.

Will didn't mention that he had slept on the floor, even before he had a sleeping roll, multiple times at *Hannibal's* behest. He hesitated a little longer, shifting from foot to foot, but Hannibal only waited patiently, one eyebrow raised.

“It is a very big bed, Will.” He reasoned, sliding a little further down the length of it himself, “come.” He finally said, and Will reluctantly abided, putting as much distance as he could between them both.

They were both dressed in sleepwear and if Hannibal had wanted to take advantage, Will reasoned, he'd already had plenty of opportunities to do so. He sighed allowing himself to

sink into the softness of the mattress and turned his back to his captor. It was light enough in his room, with the candles still burning for his benefit, and he didn't think even Mason would risk coming into Hannibal's personal space to get to him. Hannibal waited until he could hear steady breathing behind him and propped himself up on one elbow to properly admire his sleeping companion. That he had finally reached this point was not lost on him, and there was still so much further to go. He drifted off picturing the day that Will would come willingly to his bed, and to do more than just sleep.

Chapter 16

The generators had been a fairly easy fix, being that it was the motors inside of them that needed the fixing. Will had enough experience in that department to have them whirring to life again, even with the limited tools he'd been afforded. The machines were two large rectangular blocks of metal, with vents along one end and an array of buttons on the other. Will had had to swing open a tiny door on the side and stick his head through to solve the problem, and now his face was smudged with oil. In comparison to the rest of Hannibal's land, they were definite eyesores, which explained why they were at the very edge of the property. He had passed them multiple times while looking for a way out, and so he knew that the gurgling noises they were emitting where, in fact, a good sign.

"Thank you, Will. I'm impressed." Hannibal said, helping him up. Will only hesitated a moment before accepting the hand offered to him and getting to his feet.

"It uh- it was nothing," He said, cursing himself for blushing and attempting the quash the small part of him that preened at the compliment.

It was mid-morning, and Will had been on edge since waking beside Hannibal a few hours before. He'd jumped from the bed to run for the door but, unsure if he was actually allowed to leave or not, had had to sit at the desk and wait for his captor to arise.

"I disagree, as I believe the rest of the household will." He smiled and inclined his head for Will to follow after him as he made his way to the house.

They were met with cheers. A little over the top, but not entirely unappreciated by Will who had gone so long being looked over by others, even before the world had ended.

"Hey, Will!" One of them called from the doorway to the sitting room, "I've got a van that needs fixing, you think you could take a look?"

"Matthew," The coolness of Hannibal's voice brought the others around them to silence. "We can discuss this at a later date," It sounded like an admonishment, and Will rubbed his arm nervously, even as the man, *Matthew*, approached, seemingly unaffected by the tone.

"Sorry Doctor Lecter," He ducked his head, "Just thought I'd introduce myself properly."

Matthew was young, perhaps in his early twenties, with short dark hair and murky green eyes. Will was cautious of him, as he was with almost everyone Hannibal had chosen to take in, but it didn't seem that this one meant him harm, at least not in the way that Mason Verger did.

"I'm not bad with car motors either-" He offered, in a small voice that might not have been audible at all if Hannibal hadn't silenced everyone moments before. "And I don't mind, if it will help-"

He looked up at Hannibal beside him, wondering if he might have overstepped his bounds in offering assistance, but the man's face was unreadable.

“Great, see ya around,” And with that Matthew headed around them and was gone.

The other's started to disperse as well, and Hannibal led Will to the kitchen where a bucket of water was sat beside the counter. Without speaking, he pulled his paisley pocket square from his suit jacket, dipped it in the water and raised it to Will's face, to rid him of the dark stains there. It was cold, and some of the water trickled down his face to sit in his collarbones, but Will didn't move and allowed Hannibal to work the dirt from his face. When he was finished, Hannibal still said nothing, and Will felt an odd pressure rising in his chest.

“I'm sorry,” He said, without meaning to.

Hannibal hummed and abandoned the pocket square to hang over the edge of the kitchen sink, taking longer than necessary to dry his hands and then neatly fold the towel.

“What for?” He eventually asked, in a voice that gave nothing away.

Will cleared his throat, wishing he'd said nothing; “For offering to fix the van?” He posed it as a question.

Hannibal didn't reply, only dabbed Will's face dry with the towel and then placed it aside, clearly waiting for more.

“I'm supposed to ask,” Will guessed eventually, not wanting the awkward silence to go on any longer. “I shouldn't have to,” He realised aloud, “But I'm supposed to.”

“Yes.” Hannibal's face softened some. He tapped his fingernails across the counter, a deliberate measure to draw the moment out longer still.

Will shuffled his feet, hoping he had appeased his keeper.

“I believe it would be good for you to have a purpose,” Hannibal finally said, “You are clearly skilled in this area and, as you know, we have recently come to need a mechanic.

“If somebody comes to you with something in need to repair, you will ask me first, before you agree to anything, is that acceptable?”

Will nodded, he would have hated having to ask for permission before, he was a fully grown man after all, but with Hannibal it had become routine and felt almost normal. Will helped Hannibal make lunch then. The rest of the meat had been cooked and stored in the refrigerator and Will was glad that Hannibal dealt with that while he peeled and chopped vegetables and learnt the names of all the spices Hannibal had grown on the sill of his half-boarded window.

“*Kmynai*,” The word felt odd on Will's tongue as he repeated it. He held the little glass jar up to inspect the tiny brown seeds beneath the light. “It sort of looks like Caraway.”

Hannibal hummed appreciatively, “It is exactly that, Kmynai is the Lithuanian name for it.”

“You're from Lithuania?”

“Originally.” It was a blunt enough answer that Will knew not to pry any further. It was peculiar that Hannibal had shared anything about himself at all. Usually he was the one prying into *Will's* past.

“So, what are we having?” He asked after a few moments of silence, now that he had remembered how to talk, it seemed he very rarely shut up.

“Juka,” Came the one worded reply, Hannibal was intensely focused on his work.

“Juka?”

“Blood soup.”

“Ah.”

Will swallowed, gripping the knife in his hand a little harder. He had almost forgotten how much he wanted to get away from this place, but the idea of drinking another human's blood did a pretty good job at reminding him.

“I, uh-” He heard Hannibal place his utensils down and when he turned he was facing him, “I don't think I can eat that.”

“You can and you will.” It was said so matter of fact that, for a moment, Will was dumbfounded and unsure how to retort.

“Have you ever had black pudding?” Hannibal asked, obviously not expecting a reply to the earlier statement. Will nodded. “It's the same.”

“It's *not* the same, I-”Will's hands shook, suddenly remembering where he was and who he was with. “Please don't make me.” He tried, but Hannibal remained unaffected by his discomfort.

“I'm afraid I must insist.”

Feeling a sudden rush of anger burn like acid beneath his skin, Will flung his knife down so that it skidded along the sleek counter-top to land on the floor at the other side of the island. Bile rose in his throat as he turned to gage Hannibal's reaction. He merely paused to look over his shoulder, before continuing with the broth. This only incensed Will further and, clenching his jaw, he pulled a second knife from the holder and flung it across the room. It crashed into the wall before dropping to the floor, and by then he had already moved on to the glass jar of caraway seeds beside him.

“Fucking *Kmynai,”* He muttered, raising his hand above his head and aiming to throw it with enough force that the glass might smash and send seeds ricocheting in all directions. But before he could, he felt a grip firm enough to crush bone around his wrist. He hissed in pain, feeling his face and neck burn with his temper, and tried to twists from the grip, only to have his arm hoisted up behind his back in an excruciating hold.

“Drop it,” The voice was closer than he expected it to be, and offensively detached.

With another grunt of pain, he let the jar slip from between his fingers and felt Hannibal’s spare hand slide up his spine to catch it.

“Thank you.”

“*Fuck you.*” He'd lost himself now, heart thundering against his rib cage, almost shaking with the adrenaline. It felt *good*, he felt alive.

“I will let you go now. I suggest you take a moment to calm down and don't try anything that you will come to regret.”

Will nodded, forcing himself to go lax in his captor’s arms, despite his chest heaving with each heavy breath.

“Good.” And with that Hannibal gently lowered his arm and stepped back. Watching him with a simple curiosity.

Will inhaled deeply, rolling the pain from his shoulder.

“I'm not drinking the blood,” His voice was more feeble than he'd have liked, still coming down from his outburst.

“You will.”

“I *won't*”

Hannibal dropped the subject then, watching silently as Will walked around the island to crouch with his back to the corner, a position Hannibal often found him in when he collected him from his room in the morning. Will felt an ache grow behind his eyes, accompanied by a dizziness that had him slumping entirely to the floor. He registered his shoulders beginning to shake before he heard the sob tear from his lips and then in an instant Hannibal was crouched before him, hushing him and dabbing the tears from his cheeks with the side of his thumb.

“I feel like I'm losing myself,” He admitted in a croaky voice, not bothering to bat Hannibal's hands away.

“No,” Hannibal stated, and for once his inflexibility was comforting, “You were lost, but now you're found. You're with others.” He lifted Will's face with one finger when his head drooped forward. “You were alone for so long, it is only normal that you find it hard to re-assimilate yourself.”

“Is it *normal* to eat people?” He spat, some of his ire returning, enough that he yanked his head from Hannibal's grip.

“Normality has evolved into something new.” He stated, effecting the same calm composure as always, “We can hardly follow the rules of a society that no longer exists.”

Hannibal scooped him up to standing as if he weighed nothing at all and placed a hand on either side of his waist to steady him.

“Look at me Will,” He commanded, smiling when he was obeyed, “See it the way I see it,” and there was such sincerity there, such a need to be seen, that Will could hardly refuse him.

He allowed himself to be drawn into the dark maroon eyes, the mask gone so completely that he hardly needed to work at all to unravel the workings of Hannibal's mind.

“Their deaths serve a purpose,” He murmured, looking deeper still, entranced. “They are prey, scavenging to survive, there to be picked apart by the predators. To be hunted.”

He stepped closer, so that their noses were almost touching, as if he might see straight through Hannibal's eyes and into the pulsating brain that lay behind.

“They are beneath me,” He continued, more quietly now, almost a whisper. “They are elevated in their deaths, given meaning in nourishing those who do not think so mundanely as they do. Their deaths are not necessary, but convenient, practical.” He swallowed, having delved far enough.

“You put the life in your belly and you live,” Hannibal whispered, stroking a long curl from Will's tear-damp eyes and leaning in to kiss his forehead. Will nodded and lay his head against his keeper's chest, entirely exhausted.

“Well done Will,” Hannibal murmured, taking his arm to lead him back to his room, “You don't have to eat the soup.”

~

Will didn't know how long he stayed inside of himself, allowing his mind to provide some sanctuary. He fished, in the lake not far from his house in Wolf Trap, Winston was sleeping with his head resting on Will's knee, and though he knew those two instances couldn't have taken place at the same time, he hardly minded. When he became aware of his surroundings, it was to the sound of the other's bidding each other good night as they passed just outside of the door. Will led down on his sleep-roll, squinting up at the light bulb above him and wondering if there was a chance that he had not done a good enough job on the generators. If they would break again during the night and leave him in total darkness. He had yelled at Hannibal, *swore* at him, and thrown his knives across the room. He doubted he would be so quick to retrieve him this time. Suddenly he was swamped with both terror and guilt, and he got to his knees and shuffled to his door, knocking on it in vain. No one answered, there were no voices outside either and he felt his chest tighten in panic. He shouldn't have been so rude, he'd already eaten flesh, what was so different about blood?

“Hannibal?” He called out, reaching up to the door handle with the intention of rattling it.

Only, when he pulled it down towards himself, the door slid open to the unlit corridor. He gasped, shocked by the uncertainty that ran through him. Wondering if Hannibal knew he hadn't locked him in, if he was allowed out or if he should stay put. He glanced up at the light

again and it flickered as if in warning, which was enough to send him to his feet and towards the stairs.

He passed the basement, with barely a glance in its direction.

The door to Hannibal's room was ajar, and will slipped through it quickly, not wanting to come across Verger or Dolarhyde on the landing. Hannibal was awake, a book resting open on his lap, lit by a small bedside lamp, and he only looked up from it when Will clicked the door fully shut behind him.

“Hello, Will,” He said, as if entirely unsurprised to see him there.

Will said nothing, eyes flicking to the floor and then back to the man in the bed until Hannibal peeled back to duvet and patted the space beside him, and Will felt himself finally relax.

Chapter 17

Will woke alone the next morning, but with a canteen of water and a plate of scrambled eggs and sausage waiting on the bedside table beside him. The food was still steaming, and Will took time to stretch the kinks in his back before taking it over to eat at the desk, he didn't want to risk getting crumbs in Hannibal's bed. When he'd all but polished his plate, he sat at the harpsichord and ran through his scales, amused that he could now do so with his eyes closed.

~

Down stairs in the dining room, Hannibal sat across from Matthew to have him reiterate the rules regarding Will working on his van.

With a put upon sigh the young man went through them for the second time; “Don't take my eye off of him, don't give him anything he can use as a weapon, if he runs don't cause any permanent damage, do not kill him.”

“The last one is imperative,” Hannibal said coolly, staring Matthew in the eye until he had to duck his head.

“I won't *kill* him, I kind of like him,” Matthew took a sip from his water canteen, lowering it to the table when he caught the sinister look on Hannibal's face.

“You will not make any romantic or sexual advances on Will.” He stated, firmly.

Matthew had to squeeze his lips together in order not to spray him with a mouthful of water. He sputtered a little as he swallowed and grinned towards the man he found so horrifyingly aweinspiring.

“I wouldn't dare,” He assured him, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth, “You've made it remarkably clear that he's yours, and I'd like to continue living.”

He laughed again, slightly more nervously and was about to excuse himself when their attention was drawn to a presence in the doorway. Will cleared his throat and looked towards Hannibal as if awaiting instructions.

“Good morning Will,” Hannibal smiled up at him, “If you'd still like to, Matthew will take you to look at his van this morning.”

Will's eyebrows shot up, as if he hadn't actually expected permission to do so.

“Yeah, I'd like to. I, um, thank you-” He said, and then not wanting to seem too keen added, “for the breakfast, I mean.”

In truth, after so long sat aimlessly in between his time with Hannibal, Will was itching to have something to do. Something that reminded him of himself and his home before, and

fixing engines and motors fit the bill perfectly.

“I'll, um, get my shoes-” And he was off to his little room to collect the boots Hannibal had given him, padding quickly down the hall in socked feet like an excited child on Christmas morning.

Matthew stood to follow, stopping in the doorway when Hannibal cleared his throat behind him.

He span on his heel and held his hands up.

“I will not make any romantic or sexual advances on Will.” He repeated, gravely.

~

“It looks like it's just a clogged fuel filter,” Will said, wiping his hands on his trousers and hoping Hannibal wouldn't mind.

“Just?” Matthew raised an eyebrow and took a step closer to look in the hood, “as in, you can fix it?”

“I should be able to, I need a screwdriver to-” He paused when Matthew sucked air in through teeth beside him, “what?”

“Technically, I'm not allowed to give you anything you can use as a weapon,” He dipped his head apologetically.

“Oh.”

“Yep.”

Will wiped his brow and sighed, it was still morning and the sun was just peeking over the everstretching cluster of trees. The snow had melted now and the ground was crisp with frost. The vehicles were kept a few miles away from the house, and with the fence out of sight and the familiarity of a faulty engine before him and oil on his hands, he'd almost forgotten he was a captive at all.

“What would I do, try to jab you in the eye and make a run for it?” Will asked, frustrated to be reminded of his place.

“It's what I would do in your place,” Matthew shrugged as he spoke.

“But I don't even know the way and-”

“It's not gonna happen.” Matthew cut him off, “Sorry.”

With a bitter laugh Will placed his hand on the van's bonnet and shook his head.

“It's just as well,” He said peering up over his arm.

“Oh?”

“I was going to jab you in the eye and make a run for it.”

Matthew laughed then, placing a hand over his eyes and then yanking it quickly away.

“Oh shit, not suppose to let you out of my sight either.”

Will joined him in laughing sincerely, adjusting his glasses as they slipped down the bridge of his nose, and felt some of the agitation lift.

“He really gave you a talking to, didn't he.” Matthew nodded, “Fine, get over here then.” Matthew tilted his head in confusion.

“If I can't have a screwdriver, you're going to need to do it.” Will explained, “do you have any idea what a fuel filter looks like?”

“Yeah,” Matthew said, defensively. “It's that square thing there, right?”

“Actually, it's cylindrical.”

“Ah, well I don't know how you can see *anything* through all that hair.”

Will chuckled again, and wondered why he'd never been able to socialize with the same confidence before civilization crumbled around him. Perhaps it was harder to commit a social faux pas in the company of serial killers. The thought didn't comfort him much. Nor did the fact that he had actually faired better in that regard since the had world ended.

He tugged at the hair that stretched to his shoulder now, picturing Hannibal coming at him with a pair of scissors.

“What did you mean when you said i'm '*his*'?” Will asked. Leaning back against the front of the van.

“You heard that, huh?” His voice was distorted from amongst the machinery, “he's never *kept* anyone before, you must be pretty special.”

Will frowned, “Not really, and i'm not” He said, banging the metal propped above Matthews head to make him jump, “*His*, I mean.”

“I wouldn't act so defensive,” He stood to straighten his back, his hands streaked with black stains up past his wrists. “It's probably the safest you can be,” He added, pointing the screwdriver towards him.

“I doubt that,” Will protested, motioning for him to get back to work and feeling a slight reclamation of power when he immediately obeyed.

“No really,” He insisted, voice only just sounding above the clunk of metal, “He'd kill anyone who tried to take you, basically threatened to do as much to me if I so much a laid a hand on you.” “And I should be flattered?” Will huffed.

“Pretty much,” Matthew chuckled, “It's as flattering as i've ever seen him act and i've been with him nearly the whole time.”

Will didn't answer, he didn't want to have to admit that Hannibal had been mostly kind to him, *flattering* even. He tugged at the beard that had grown longer than he'd ever have allowed it to and wandered what Hannibal saw in him that made him so desirable.

It took a couple of hours to drain and dry the filter and the two of them talked amiably while they waited. When they returned, lunch was being served and, to Will's relief, blood was not a main ingredient.

“I was wondering if maybe you'd lend me a razor,” Will spoke quietly, as if it were an intimate issue, but really he didn't want to other's to hear Hannibal refuse him.

“I only have straight razors, have you used one before?”

“No, but I could try-”

“It wouldn't be worth the risk of injuring yourself,” Hannibal shook his head and watched Will's shoulders slump in defeat. “However, I am well practised with them, If you'd like I could do it for you, and perhaps trim your hair as well?”

“Uh- yeah, thanks,” Will said, so happy to be allowed to fix his ragged appearance that he didn't actually think about what he had agreed to.

It only dawned on him when he was sat on the desk chair in Hannibal's room, with a pair of sharp scissors and a folded straight razor laid out beside him.

Hannibal draped a towel over his shoulders, and, after trimming some of the length, began to cake Will's face in shaving cream, applying it with a small wooden brush in circular motions. It was cool to the touch and had the scent of cedarwood and lemongrass.

“How did you make this?” Will asked, wanting to delay the moment the blade would touch his skin as much as possible.

“I didn't, it apparently wasn't high on the list for most.” He tugged Will's beard gently, as if to make a point.

“It was on your list though?” His adam's apple bobbed nervously as Hannibal spread the cream down over his neck as well.

“I aim always to live, and never to simply exist, Will.” He took a step back to appraise the foam's distribution. “No talking now.”

Hannibal opened the razor with one swift flick, the edge of the blade catching the light in a way that was rather unsettling. As he positioned it just beneath Will's cheek bone, Will wrung his hands together, thinking he'd knock him away if he didn't do something with them.

The first stroke was smooth and painless but still, Will squeezed his eyes shut for the second and by the third he had to actively control his trembling as not to get nicked. Hannibal sighed

and took a step back, but the glimmer in his eye suggested that he was anything but annoyed by Will's reaction.

He took a moment to commit the image to memory, pupils blown wide with fear, fingers twisted tightly together and all while still sat, waiting patiently for Hannibal to resume. He leant in again, and heard the small, sharp intake of breath when he moved to the delicate skin beneath Will's jaw.

“Shh, relax Will,” He soothed, placing a hand on his shoulder until he felt the muscles unwind beneath his touch.

With two fingers, he tilted his head back as far as it would comfortably go, mourning the view of anxious, cobalt eyes, and slid the razor along the length of a pale blue vein, stroking the line of smooth skin after and pausing above the pulse to feel it throb quickly beneath his fingers. He let his breath fall hot against it, and felt Will shiver in response.

He could feel a familiar swell beneath his black, silk briefs, pushing visibly against his trousers too, but kept Will's face tilted away. To have him submit to his touch in this way was enough for now. He would only scare him away if he tried to push his trust too far.

When he was done, Hannibal ran his knuckles along the smooth jawline presented to him. Relived to see colour returning to Will's face, having gone rather pale with fright.

“Your hair now, I think,” Hannibal suggested, circling to stand behind Will and running his fingers through his curls.

He rather liked the length. He'd have Will's face forever framed by hickory brown, but the ends were split and too evident of his life before Hannibal, so a trim was necessary.

The blades snipped close enough to Will's ear to remind him that he wasn't entirely out of danger yet. The razor, however, had been left precariously open on the desk, and Will wondered if he could even bring himself to slit Hannibal's throat, if it meant his freedom.

But then, what was *freedom*? He conjured a vivid image of his dark, squalid, apartment and the screeching from beyond the boarded windows. The dirt and the hunger and, most of all, the bleary isolation that had stretched over so many years, that he'd forgotten how to speak at all.

Winston appeared then, in the doorway of the replica in his mind, all floppy ears and scruffy fur and Will sighed aloud.

“What are you thinking, Will?” The voice brought him back, just as his hair was pulled taut at the bottom of his neck to be snipped.

“I miss my dog,” He admitted, without reservation, and he did, even though it was likely that there was nothing left to miss.

Hannibal was quiet, the only sounds were the metallic click of blade meeting blade and whisper of hair falling to curl against the floor. Will wondered if someone like Hannibal

could understand the bond one could have with an animal. What he had done to Kevin suggested that he must, or he would not have thought it adequate punishment. The man in question came to stand before him, and the silence stretched another moment before he tilted Will's face to meet his own and spoke.

“I am sorry.”

And whether genuine or not, Will found himself reaching out to take Hannibal's hand in his own.

A silent acceptance of his apology.

Chapter 18

Hannibal cared for Will, it was as ridiculous as it was irrefutable. He pondered that fact as he sat, book in his lap, with Will still sleeping soundly beside him. What at first had been simple curiosity had quickly blossomed into a sort of affection and then a virile possession. Will was *his*. As if to prove the point, the sleeping man turned to face him, lips parted and breath steady against Hannibal's arm

He would never give Will the freedom he claimed to yearn for and a part of him would have to always be on edge for that very reason. Even as Will seemed to outwardly settle, to accept the life Hannibal had chosen for him, he knew that Will could now read him more accurately than he could read Will. What had at first been a game of cat and mouse, could now mean Hannibal losing the one thing he was adamant on keeping.

He placed a hand to Will's newly cut hair, messed by sleep, and felt him beginning to stir. Will was his, but he wasn't a *pet*, as some of the other's claimed when they thought they were out of earshot. He wasn't a hound like Mason or Dolarhyde. He wasn't a fish, kept within the confines of a glass tank to be observed like Katherine or Peter.

Will's eyes fluttered open, and for a brief moment he gazed up at Hannibal through heavy lidded eyes. Then he registered the hand on his head and shrunk away, sitting up and scooting to lean against the headboard, with the blanket pulled up around his shoulders, as if to maintain his decency despite being fully dressed in borrowed pyjamas.

“Good morning Will,” Hannibal's voice was throaty at the start of the day, his accent heavier.

Will cleared his throat before speaking; “Good morning.”

“You slept well,” It was a statement, not a question, so Will nodded.

In truth he had, having a warm body beside his gave him some misplaced sense of safety. It had become routine for Will to sleep beside Hannibal, so much so that his sleeping roll and blankets had been cleared from the little room on the first floor and his small collection of clothes were kept folded at the bottom of Hannibal's armoire.

For two weeks they had shared a bed, and for two weeks Will had woken slightly surprised to find that Hannibal had not taken advantage of him. His signs of arousal were not well hidden, a visible bulge beneath his trousers, his eyes dilating and growing darker still, especially when he had Will at a disadvantage. But despite small touches to his face and shoulders, perhaps a hand to the small of his back, he had gone unscathed.

Will suspected that sexual assault did not sit beside murder and cannibalism in Hannibal's mind; that it was less for Will's sake and more for the fact that Hannibal would not lower himself to such an act. Still, he found himself warming to the man, and had to constantly remind himself that every choice Hannibal made was inherently selfish.

“Can I help Peter with the chickens today?” He asked, he had not spoken to the man since the generators had failed and then it had only been a few words and a wanting apology.

Hannibal hid his delight for the fact that asking permission came so readily to his captive now. “You may.”

~

It was just after lunch when Will slipped on his boots and began making his way across the damp ground to the coop. He was so entirely occupied by thoughts of how to amend things with Peter that he didn't hear the footfalls behind him until he reached the bare tree just outside of the shed. He turned on his heel a moment too late, to have the back of his head slammed against the thick trunk.

~

Reality came back to him as a blur, accompanied by a white-hot pain at the base of his skull.

“Hannibal?” He asked, confused to be waking anywhere other than his bed.

“Not quite-” The voice was smug, slurred and just grim enough to match the mouth it came from.

Rough hands gripped Will's shirt and pulled him to his feet where he swayed unsteadily as Mason leered over him, in focus now that he was stood so close. Will's stomach flipped and he felt a sharp sense of dread looking into eyes that glistened with sadistic intent. He stumbled backwards.

“Ah, ah,” Mason tutted, wagging a finger, “stay right where you are, you *know* you shouldn't be out here!” He was entirely amused, watching as Will scanned his surroundings, noting the mess of twisted bare branches above him and the lack of anything even slightly familiar.

“Hannibal will be *so* sad when he finds out you've gotten away,” His stitches pulled taut as he attempted to smirk, “but at least it will save him from the news of your *tragic* passing.”

Will ground his teeth together, clenching his fists and spinning to try and spot the houses perimeter through the gaps in the damp forest that surrounded them. It was impossible, he realised with a silent cuss, his glasses had been taken.

“You've gone so *quiet*, why only the other day you had *so much* to say,” Mason placed his hands on his hips, a confident gesture that reminded Will how little chance he stood in the thick of a forest that Mason happened to know like the back of his hand. “Nattering away in Hannibal's ear, so happy to finally be treated like a *real* boy.”

“Fuck you,” Will spat, tensing for a fight.

“Hm, perhaps I might just fuck *you*,” He took a step forward, “See why the good Doctor is so *enamoured*.”

Will tried to keep the distance between them, feeling something promisingly solid beneath his foot.

“I must say, I do like this new look,” Verger pulled a considerable blade from the back of his trousers, extracting it from its tan, leather sheathing to reveal a sharp metal tip and serrated edge.

“So young with all that hair gone, you're all doe eyes and pink lips, it makes me want to ju-”He let out a howl as Will scooped the rock up from his feet and flung it at his head. It connected with his left temple, the jagged edge drawing blood.

It was all the advantage Will would get and he wasted no time in fleeing, thankful above all things that he'd been allowed out without his cuffs that morning. He shot forward, entirely unsure which direction would take him back to the house and equally uncertain as to whether he wanted to go back there at all.

Technically he was out, he was *free*.

His train of thought was cut short as a sturdy, gnarled root tripped him and sent him hurtling down a steep decline. He heard the crunch of bone before he felt the pain, and when he did it was all consuming. He cried out, unable to stifle the sound and cursed himself for it when he heard the manic laughter closing in on him from above.

The ground squelched beneath him, he'd landed in a bog of sorts, and the tar-thick mud was relentless in clinging heavily to his trousers and oozing into his boots. Tears stung his eyes as he reached down to examine the ankle, whimpering when filthy fingers brushed against the rapidly swelling injury. He tried, and failed, to find purchase in the mess of brown sludge and rotting leaves around him, somehow propelling himself into action when he peered up to see his pursuer making his way steadily down the slope towards him. He hissed as he dragged himself from the marsh, shifting most of his weight onto his good foot and hobbling onwards. He felt bile rise in his throat as the pain jolted through his calf and thigh but some primal drive to survive forced him to struggle on regardless.

The ground hardened slightly the further he limped from the bog, but it did nothing to stop the utter panic rising in his chest. He made a sharp turn when he was far enough from the bottom of the slope to be out of view, making an attempt to cover his tracks which was near impossible as it required him to drag his lame foot over the prints in the mud which only pulled a guttural cry from his throat.

The hysterical shouts of the man chasing him were only growing louder, Will was not foolish enough to believe he could outrun him in his state. The only chance at protection came in the form of a small alcove to his right. Realistically it was too small for a grown man to conceal himself within, but Will was nothing if not determined at that moment, and he contorted his body, limbs tight against his torso, grunting when one foot pressed unwieldy against the other.

It started to rain then, a downpour so tremendous that it produced a constant, translucent curtain of water to shield him further from Verger's view. He praised it quietly, knowing it would serve to conceal his tracks as well. Another time he might have felt claustrophobic,

folded as he was in the narrow gap the mound of earth provided, but now it only seemed like a small blessing amidst never-ending catastrophe. When the rain let up there would be two choices. Find a path to follow to some form of vacated hovel or return to the house. He could have kicked himself for even considering the latter if he weren't so crippled. He looked down at his ankle again, now beginning to darken to an angry red, where it was folded beneath him. He bit his lip as he attempted to roll the joint, stifling a whimper when the already torturous pain doubled to something unendurable.

Broken. Definitely broken.

He tilted his head back against the packed dirt behind him and immediately regretted the motion when a wave of nausea washed over him. Groaning, he closed his eyes and tried to remember the details of his emergency first aid training so many years before.

He vaguely recalled something about compression, and removed his sodden jacket. *Never attempt to realign the bones yourself.* The nasal voice of the instructor materialised as he reached down to do just that, and so instead he tied the garment just tightly enough to alleviate some of the building, burning pressure.

He sighed, it was barley an improvement but it was all he had the means to do. The rain would let up eventually and then he'd need to-

Need to what? Hobble as fast and as far as he could or, and he knew it should feel twisted to even consider it, return to Hannibal. As if to weigh in on the internal debate, the throbbing in his ankle momentarily intensified, and Will could have wept in frustration when he realised the decision had already been made.

Hannibal had medical knowledge, Hannibal had shelter, and a soft bed and warm hands and…

"*There* you are."

Will was yanked mercilessly from his hiding space, landing with grunt on the feculent ground as rainwater bucketed down on him. He squinted against the downpour as he struggled upright, just in time to see Mason's leering smile and the way his hair lay soaked and heavy against the scores in his cheeks, before his booted foot connected with Will's stomach and sent him over onto his back.

The sadist was upon him then, straddling him, with the knife in hand. Will struck out to grip Mason's wrist and wrench it to the side, watching to blade slip from his fingers and land with a splash in the puddle beside them. Ignoring the agony he felt, Will kicked and lurched until Mason was the one on his back and they wrestled that way coating themselves in filth, until Mason let out an inhuman scream and threw his head forward to crush against Will's skull.

With a grunt he fell away, hand flying instinctively to the pain before he even had time to acknowledge Verger rising to his feet and stalking towards him. He'd recovered the blade and, despite it all, he was *still* smiling, teeth stained red. Will was flooded with a sense of desperation unlike anything he had experienced before, weaponless and crippled and half blind even before the rain had begun pelting against his face. The blade was pressed against

his throat, hard enough to pull a trickle of blood from beneath paper-thin skin, but Will couldn't register the pain, eyes blown wide with adrenaline.

“Well, this *has* been fun,” Mason had to yell to be heard above the torrential rain.

Will felt the blade begin to bite down harder and decided then that he would not perish on his ass, coated in muck. Not after everything he'd survive up to that point. He vaulted forward, twisting aside just enough that the knife sliced into his shoulder instead of his neck. He watched, as if he were merely observing from afar, as his fingernails dug past the thick stitches in Mason's cheeks and twisted. The thread began to tear free, mangling the flesh there until it hung open and resembled something closer to raw minced meat than a human face.

Blood spurted to run crimson between dirt-brown fingers, the sensation was sickeningly warm against Will's numbed skin. He felt something akin to a frenzied excitement as he bore in harder still, feeling the man's tongue flail uselessly as Verger gargled on his own blood. His body twisted as he fell away, to land face first in the murky water that rippled around him.

Will watched him for a few moments, catching his breath as the rain continued its onslaught, and then he retrieved the knife and began to limp, not in any particular direction, with a pleasant buzzing inside his otherwise absent skull.

The weather gradually calmed, until only fat drops of water fell from the tipping branches above. Will trudged onward, fingertips tingling where they had rendered Mason's mouth useless. He faded in and out of consciousness, always moving, and at some point - between struggling through the forest and sunbathing with Winston at his side - the sky turned dark.

The night enveloped him as he gradually gained awareness of his surroundings, and feeling returned to him like an assault. The base of his skull throbbed, his shoulder burned as if the gash there had been drawn with a red hot poker, and his ankle screamed its protest above all else. He slumped to his knees, leaning side on against a thick tree trunk, and he might have had some hope for survival, if a cacophony of infernal screeching had not risen up around him at that moment.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“D-Dr L-L-Lecter?”

Peter lingered, fraught with anxiety, in the doorway to Hannibal's room, arms drawn taut towards himself, his stutter noticeably worse than normal.

“Yes, Peter?” Hannibal felt his stomach clench in a way that it had not done since he was a child. If this were not of the utmost importance, he'd have to punish the man for the simple audacity of causing such an emotion.

“It's W-W-”

“Will?” Hannibal supplied, feeling the tension within him increase. “Has he attempted another escape?”

If he had it was unfounded, Hannibal had seen to it that Will's quality of life had markedly improved. He tried to restrain his lips from twisting into a snarl but failed upon hearing Peter's next words.

“V-Verger t-t-took him”.

It had been unusually difficult to maintain his composure as he enlisted the help of Matthew and several other's in, what would most accurately be called, a manhunt. Weapons and medical supplies were gathered, and Hannibal ground his teeth together as each minute passed, knowing Mason would be using the time to put distance between them.

He ignored the excited murmuring around him as he climbed into the passenger seat of Matthew's van. It was not often he joined such excursions, but he would oversee every ounce of suffering that was to come to Verger himself. They followed an old volvo, that Will had fixed up only a week before, as it trundled over the grass and onto a dirt road a few hundred metres from where the vehicles were kept. Matthew knew better than to attempt small talk with the man beside him, and so kept his eyes fixed ahead of them, hoping to find Will alive.

Hampson, Lounds and Chilton had been sent out on foot to scout the woods, Dolarhyde was kept behind under the guise of 'holding down the fort' as Matthew had put it; lest the Great Red Dragon get carried away and not stop at Verger.

The thought of what he would do to the *cretin* that had deemed to take what was his away from him gave him some small solace, as they skirted the edge of the forest.

~

Will clutched the knife in two hands, peering up through black branches to an equally dark and starless sky, wishing he were imagining the shifting shapes there and knowing with a gut-wrenching certainty that he was not. All sight had long ago been lost, and Will sat frozen in place in the hopes that immobility would help him go unnoticed by the monsters that swooped and screamed above him. He had been in similar situations before, but then there had been somewhere to hide, here the darkness was his only cover, and the beasts seemed to navigate through it with ease. He feared that even his chattering teeth would be enough to draw their attention, but it had long ago become impossible to stop his shaking.

A thick branch above him snapped under the pressure of a thrashing wing, and with it fell the demon who'd caused it to break, landing with a thud in amongst the damp leaves before Will. It was easily twice his size, even curled in on itself, and when it began to unfurl tattered wings to stretch to its true height and width, Will was paralysed with fear. The creatures pointed nostrils flared at the scent of Will's blood, bulging yellow eyes rolling back into his head as it stalked forward, injured from the fall but not nearly enough to even the playing field.

Even with a gun, Will had always made certain never to be within such a short distance of the beasts. Now one stood only metres from him, and the knife he held could have been made of styrofoam, for all the use it would be. He felt the tree he had collapsed against behind his back, and wished the bark would engulf him, he'd rather suffocate tangled in its roots, than be burnt alive. As if to trigger more thoughts of singed hair and peeling flesh, the beast flung it's head back and let out a banshee-like scream, flames licking the branches above them and illuminating every inch of the creatures leather-thick skin, as it took several swaying steps forward. Will took in the thing's protruding ribs, wondering if its emaciated state would work in his favour or against him. The monster was desperate to tear into crisp flesh but at the same time, unsteady with starvation.

Its breath was sweltering and pungent, sharp teeth yellowed and cracked, and Will took what would be his only chance to drive the knife hard into the monster's concave stomach, slicing down with his last remnants of strength in a failed attempt to disembowel the bestial thing before him. Thick, brown fluid spurted across his face and neck as the monster's blood-curdling cries filled every crevice of the forest and then it was upon him, snarling and distending its jaw to ignite him where he sat.

Will scrunched his eyes shut, vaguely wondering if the numbness dulling the sting of his injuries would kindly extend to the pain of his bubbling muscle and sinew. But instead of the roar of flames, he heard only one loud resounding sound, like a tree breaking at the middle, only realising it had been a gunshot when the demon slumped over him, mouth still agape.

The weight was crushing, and Will gasped for breath, shoving helplessly at the skeletal corpse as it dug into his tender ankle. He was only half aware of approaching, fervent voices, and then hands were on him, dragging him out to lie flat on the forest floor where he could finally breathe.

“Will, look at me.”

That voice, so calm and consoling. Will tried to obey but his eyes felt heavy and it seemed the ground had decided to swallow him up after all. He felt himself sinking into the darkness as firm fingers pressed against his pulse. The world tipped around him just as he was about to doze -pulled to sit upright with his side propped against someone's chest - and he groaned, every inch of his battered body suddenly fully aware of itself. He was freezing, right down to his bones, but someone was pulling his clothing from him.

"Nnn-" he tried to protest, pulling his arms towards himself when the sleeves of his sodden shirt were tugged against. His shoulder burnt in protest and he whimpered.

"Hush, Will," The chest he was leaning against vibrated as the man spoke. "Trust that I am only doing what's best for you."

He wanted to believe it, so desperately, the voice was serene and the body it belonged to so warm and welcoming. He buried his face into the material there, nodding as he inhaled the familiar scent of cedarwood and lemongrass.

"Good, Will," his shirt slid up over his head, and Will hissed as the movement tore at the gash in his shoulder. "I know, Will, you're doing very well." He sobbed in relief, the praise settling some of the tension in his chest.

As soon as the shirt was gone a thick, dry blanket was draped over his shoulders and his trousers were pulled out from underneath in one swift motion that barley brushed against his swollen ankle. He had just enough strength to pull soft, warm fabric more tightly around himself and then he felt the weight of a second blanket and sighed, happy to have it pulled up around his face like a hood, so that he felt utterly cocooned.

His surroundings spun again as he was hoisted into strong arms and carried bridal style. He could swear his skull was full of jagged rocks, his head hanging too heavy, and he had to close his eyes until the world was the right way up again.

"Stay awake, Will."

He groaned his protest but the rough transition into the back of a car jolted him into consciousness , and he felt suddenly rigid with uncertainty, that is, until his head was lifted and placed back down upon someone's lap. A third blanket was thrown across his quivering body. He squinted up at the face above him, barely visible until the headlights of another vehicle shone through the back window upon high cheekbones and lips drawn uncharacteristically tight.

"*Hannibal*?" Will asked, uncertain.

"I've got you, Will," A hand pressed against his cheek and Will couldn't resist nuzzling into the warmth there, finally feeling some semblance of safety. He felt as if all of his body heat had been sapped from him.

'Hannibal will be so *sad when he finds out you've gotten away'.*

It was as if the words had been hissed into his ear. Will tensed then, despite the pain it caused him, imaging the dark, lonely room that awaited him. He tried to shake his head, murmuring his distress regarding the trouble he had caused. The anger, the *disappointment.*

“Will, try to calm down, we'll be back soon.”

“D-didn't try t-to leave,” He managed, through quivering lips, he tasted salt and realised he was crying. “d-didn't.”

“Shush, Will,” The hand slipped from his cheek up into his curls where it stroked reassuringly. “I know you've done nothing wrong. I am not upset with you.”

Will exhaled a shaky breath he was not aware he had been holding and curled more tightly into Hannibal's warmth so that his nose was pressed into the man's stomach.

“H-hurts, Hannibal.” He mumbled into the dress shirt.

“I'll make it better, Will.”

He drifted in and out of consciousness from that point on, much to Hannibal's disapproval, catching snippets of conversations that he couldn’t make sense of.

“- migrating, will it hold?” A woman's voice sounded from the driver's seat.

“Preparations have been put in place,” He heard Hannibal reply, though he sounded strangely distant.

When his eyes next fluttered open, it was to a gust of cold air and the ruffling of his blankets. He made a small, questioning noise only to be scooped up into Hannibal's arms and shushed.

“C-can walk,” He tried to protest after a while.

“I sincerely doubt that Will,” Hannibal answered, as they stepped into the orange light of the tunnel.

When they got to the house Will wanted nothing more than to be put to bed but he was placed in front of the fire in the, thankfully vacant, sitting room instead.

“What is that?” He asked, referring to a rather persistent banging he could hear coming from down the hall.

“It's nothing you need to worry about Will.”

Hannibal stepped around him then, returning with a footstool where his injured ankle was promptly placed. He groaned and tried to yank it back, only to shrink further into his blankets when Hannibal shot him a warning look. Instead he watched the bright flames dance before him, picturing the beast that had almost set him alight as Hannibal examined the injury and confirmed it was indeed a fracture.

“I n-need a warm b-bath,” Will insisted, chattering his teeth a little louder as if to make a point.

“You have hypothermia Will,” Hannibal stated matter of factly, tilting his captive's head aside to look at the impact wound at the back. Will felt fingers prodding the injury and flinched away from them only to be pulled back and repositioned. “Hot water will open your blood vessels too quickly and you could die.”

“Whiskey then, for the pain,” he reasoned, wincing when he heard the whiny tone of his own voice.

“Not even if I had some. Trust that it would do a lot more harm than good with you in this state.”

Hannibal turned to stoke the fire then, as Matthew entered with a tray of steaming drinks. He handed one to Will with a furrowed brow.

“You're practically blue,” he noted.

Will snorted gently, reaching out to take it in shaking hands, some of the beverage sloshing over the sides of the mug to soak through the many layers of blanket he was swaddled in. He brought the rim to his lips only to scrunch his eyes up when sickly sweet liquid flooded his mouth.

“Dr Lecter said extra sugar,” Matthew spoke before Will could voice his complaints, holding his hands up in front of himself.

“Clearly,” Will muttered, sipping the tea again anyway for its warmth. His teeth clinked against the china as he struggled to keep his hands steady.

Hannibal circled behind Will and his fire-warmed hands came to rest gently against either side of his face causing him to sigh and loosen his tensed muscles just a little.

“Hmm, you're not warming as quickly as I would have hoped,” He looked over Will's head to Matthew then, “my medical bag, please, it's in the basement.”

“D-do you have a space heater in there or something?” Will asked, shuddering.

“I'm afraid not, I merely mean to treat your injuries before I move you somewhere more convenient.” His hands remained where they were, thumbs tracing Will's jaw line, until Matthew returned with a black leather satchel, passing it to Hannibal before being excused.

He towel-dried Will's hair first, his hands becoming increasingly tender as they neared the cut at the back of his head. The once-white towel came away smeared with filth but he hardly minded when it meant having Will so amenable to his touch. Next, the doctor knelt beside Will's propped up ankle, still dreadfully painful and now a plum purple that had spread almost halfway up his calf.

“Normally I would use a cold compress immediately in situations such as these, but it will have to wait for obvious reasons.” As he spoke, Hannibal pulled another folded towel and

thick tape from his bag.

Will gasped when his ankle was shifted to sit upon the towel and only just managed to bite back a curse when Hannibal wrapped the material tightly around it, using a fair amount of the tape to keep it firmly in place.

“This will do for now,” He looked up then sternly, “you will not put any weight on it until it has healed completely.”

He waited for Will to nod before getting to his feet and peeling the blankets away from his bare shoulders. Will shivered as the air made contact with his skin, but Hannibal's hands were there in an instant, chasing the chill away.

“I'm afraid this will need stitches,” He sighed, retrieving a curved needle and a small, glass bottle of clear liquid. “This will sting,” He warned, pouring the searing fluid into the deep gash with one hand pressed to Will's bare chest to keep him in place.

He hissed and tried in vain to jerk away as rubbing alcohol, mingled pink with blood, gushed down his abdomen, to be dabbed dry with the blankets. The needle was held in the open flames of the fireplace until the point turned scalding red and then it was threaded with what appeared to be suture thread, the likes of which had not been afforded to Verger.

The first pierce tore a small sob from Will's lips, and he found himself leaning closer to his captor as his shaking returned with vigour. He felt his parted flesh begin to pull together with the second and third prick of the needle and then the process blurred into one agonizing ordeal until Hannibal tied the thread off and turned Will's head to face him.

“You are doing very well, Will,” He assured him, smiling when the man leaned in to rest his forehead against Hannibal's own, “one more,” he murmured, “and then you can rest.”

The head wound was treated with a cotton cloth and more burning liquid and Will suffered silently, the worse of it clearly over. Most of the dirt had been removed along with his clothes but his hands and face were smeared brown and red.

“I'm still so c-cold,” He whispered, untucking his arms from the blankets to accommodate Hannibal lifting him from the chair in the same bridal style as before. He looped his arms around the man's neck and buried his face against his neck when he felt the other's eyes on them in the hallway.

“I have just the remedy,” Hannibal promised, struggling to open the door to his bedroom with his elbow and nudge it closed behind him, all with the burden of a pliant Will in his arms.

“Do you trust me, Will?” He asked, as he placed him to perch on the side of the bed while he rolled back to quilt.

He collected a warm, damp flannel from the ensuite and wiped the dirt from Will's face and hands, so gently that Will could almost forget the cruelties that had been inflicted on him at the whims of the very same man, if it meant being treated so kindly from that point on.

“I trust you,” Will murmured, watching distantly as Hannibal peeled his damp boxer briefs down his legs for him. He allowed himself to be guided naked between the sheets without protest, wondering if he really did trust the man, or if what he felt was just a necessary dependence.

Hannibal inclined his head slightly, before working free the buttons of his jacket and then the vest and shirt, revealing broad shoulders and the otherwise lean muscles of his abdomen.

“What are you-” Will began to ask, but the shirtless man shushed him and began folding the clothing he had removed, before stepping from his shoes and slipping his trouser button free so that the garment dropped to his ankles to reveal long, toned legs.

In briefs only, he climbed into the bed beside Will, pressing his bare chest to an uncomfortably cold back and entwining their legs together, careful to avoid the towel-clad ankle.

Will tensed immediately, making a small effort to wriggle free when an arm looped over him and tugged him back into the body behind him.

“This is a very efficient way to treat Hypothermia,” The words were spoken softly into his ear, reassuringly, with only the barest hint of smugness.

He tried to shake his head and pull away a while longer before relenting, partly because he was too weak to really put up a fight but mostly due to the fact that the body pressed up against his own felt wonderful, allowing Hannibal's warmth to envelop him.

“And I had to be naked? He asked quietly, feeling his cheeks burn with the embarrassment of the situation, and his own unwillingness to put an end to it.

“It's most effective this way,” came the simple answer from behind him, as a hot palm pressed to his chest and the other caressed the length of his arm, as if to thaw the flesh there.

Will remained where he'd been positioned, head tucked under his captor's chin, feeling Hannibal's body heat fill the spaces around him, beneath the think goose-feather duvet. Eventually, the shaking stopped and the dizziness Will had felt subsided. Hannibal remained wrapped around him and Will didn't feel particularly compelled to object. His eyelids grew heavy and he allowed himself to fall asleep in the arms of the man who would never let him go.

Chapter End Notes

Because what's a Hannigram fic without a hypothermic Will and a nearly-naked Hannibal more than happy to oblige?

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Have two today, cos why not?

Once Will was properly warmed and sleeping soundly, Hannibal removed himself from the bed, but not before placing a gentle kiss to his temple. He let Will roll onto his back from the lack of support there, and placed his foot upon two thick cushions beneath the quilt, careful not to wake him. He'd need a bath, and Hannibal made a mental note to have Fredrick bring the warmed water up to his room, but for now that would have to wait.

There were several matters in need of urgent attention, and even with his ability to tackle multiple issues in his mind at once, Hannibal was feeling almost swamped. The monsters were moving in on the haven he had created, supplies were running low after emptying out the freezers weeks before, and there was a mutilated creature being kept quiet with large doses of chloral hydrate in Will's old room. He decided that was as good a place as any to start.

Mason stirred and spluttered as the door swung open, just coming around from his last dose. Will had destroyed any semblance of a functioning mouth, his face hung open in several uneven flaps of bloody flesh. He'd been found floating face down in several inches of boggy water, and Hannibal's heart had sparked with excitement to think that Will had resorted to killing him. But of course the selfish man on the ground had had to gurgle then and flop onto his back. Never mind, it only meant Hannibal could kill Mason himself, and he would be far less merciful than Will had been. Matthew had tossed Verger, with an amusing amount of force, into the back of his van to be flung against the rough metal interior as they trundled on across uneven ground to find Will.

“Are you ready, Mason?” Hannibal asked, with a small smile which only increased in size as the man at his feet struggled to spew profanity in response.

~

Will awoke alone and confused, patting the space in the bed beside him to find that Hannibal was not where he should be, tangled in garish silk sheets. His head and ankle were throbbing and there was a searing pain in his shoulder when he tried to stretch his arms. He winced, swallowing a dry lump in his throat, and was just turning to the bedside table to look for water when a distressed cry rose from the garden below Hannibal's window.

There was a dull thud, followed by another faint scream and Will felt panic rise like acid in his chest.

“Hanni-” He tried to call, his voice half trapped between the sandpaper walls of his throat. He coughed and tried again but the man clearly wasn't within earshot.

Will pulled the heavy quilt back and glanced down at the sturdy padding around his ankle, biting his lip, he hoisted it from the pillows and over the side of the bed with a groan. He pressed the ball of his foot down timidly, only to tear it back when a raw pain shot up through the entire leg. The motion upended him however, and he landed in a heap on the floor, aching limbs sprawled out around himself.

He lay there awkwardly for a moment, considering what a truly stupid idea it had been to try and move at all. The noise from outside had died down and now Hannibal would find him this way, trying to push himself upright, entirely naked on the floor.

As if on cue, the door creaked open, and Hannibal entered with a look of resigned exasperation. He returned to himself after the briefest of seconds, deliberately drawing his mouth into a taut line as he placed the platter of food he had been holding on the desk and made his way towards Will.

“I distinctly remember instructing you to not put any weight on your ankle Will,” He said, in a voice so steely that Will found himself biting his lip nervously and ducking his head as he tried again to right himself and press his back against the bed.

Hannibal stood over him a moment, and would have been content to watch the man sat at his feet, drawing his arms across his exposed body, if not for the fact that he was in such poor shape.

“Up,” He said simply, after a moment, bending to scoop Will up beneath his arms as if he were an infant, and lowering him back to sit on the bed.

Will's cock rubbed up against the striped tweed of Hannibal trouser, and he felt his face redden as he realised he had awoken quite hard. His captor paid it no obvious attention, though his own cock twitched in response as he stroked a ruddy cheek with his knuckles.

“You look better, Will,” He said, as he repositioned him so that his back was supported by the headboard and his ankle was propped up as it should be. He pulled the quilt back over him to keep him decent. As much as he relished the sight of a naked and very much erect Will, Frederick would be up with the water in a few minutes time and it wasn't a view he wanted to share.

As it happened, Will was quickly softening with the pain of being manhandled in his state.

Hannibal brought the plate of food over then, perching on the edge of the bed and raising a forkful of slightly spiced sausage to Will's mouth. They had come from a tin can that Matthew had found on the floor of an otherwise empty warehouse on one of his supply runs. Loathe as Hannibal was to serve it to Will, his own supply of meat had been consumed or spoilt when the generators had broken. The fact that the slimy things had maintained their quality at all in all those years made Hannibal question why people would have found his own dietary choices so unagreeable while readily consuming such a revolting excuse for food.

“I didn't break my wrists,” Will grumbled, feeling the meat prod against his lips until he parted them to take it into his mouth anyway.

The corners of Hannibal's eyes wrinkled in a way that suggested genuine amusement but he handed the plate and cutlery to Will then, examining the line of stitches in his shoulder as he ate.

“How do you feel, Will?”

“Like i'm dying,” He grumbled, between mouthfuls.

“Well, you certainly were when I found you,” he let the fact that Will now, quite literally, owed him his life, sit heavy between them.

“Thanks for fixing me up,” Will murmured, scraping the last mouthful of scrambled egg from the plate and revelling in Hannibal's enduring sigh as he allowed the mistreatment of his cutlery to go unpunished.

“You are more than welcome Will,” He pulled the plate from Will's hands before he could disgrace himself further by licking the remnants from it and set it aside. “Now, do you care to explain why you were not in the bed where I left you?”

Will looked to the boarded window, confused; “I thought-” He shook his head, wincing when a sharp pain rattled through his skull. “-I thought I heard screaming.”

“I imagine you did,” Hannibal stated calmly, as if Will had mentioned hearing something as benign as rain pattering against the roof. “Mason was not happy to be caught, quite literally, red handed.”

“Oh God,” Will buckled under a wave of nausea, trying to curl up on himself before remembering his ankle had been deliberately positioned. “I thought I killed him.”

“You very nearly did Will,” a firm hand came to rest fondly against his shoulder, “In fact, I was rather impressed with your effort.”

Will shrank from his touch, not wishing to be praised for what he had done, even in self-defence.

There was a knock at the door then.

“Regardless,” Hannibal said as he got to his feet to answer it, “it will all be taken care of shortly.”

Frederick filled the bath, it took several journeys, laden with steaming buckets that threatened to tip onto Hannibal's bedroom floor at the slightest upset, but eventually it was done and Hannibal lifted Will carefully into the porcelain tub.

Will tensed as the water engulfed him, not sparing an inch of his battered torso, but soon enough the heat of it began to soothe his aches and he sighed, reclining against the high back.

His ankle was propped carefully out of the water, another towel rolled to keep it as comfortable as possible.

“You know there are easier ways to get water to the second floor of a house than have someone lug two buckets up at a time.” He mumbled absent-mindedly as Hannibal pressed a wash cloth to his chest and squeezed so the water trickled between barely-there pecks.

“Oh?” Hannibal's voice had taken on the same soothing tone that it always did in times like these. When they were close and alone, he was tender and attentive. If Will’s guard was truly down, he would allow himself to feel almost cherished.

“Mmm,” He let his eyes slip closed as the cloth ran down the length of one arm and Hannibal turned it gently to repeat the motion on the underside. “A water tower.”

“My men didn't mention a water tower when they visited your previous place of residence,” the cloth made its way along Will's propped up leg, “I'll bandage this properly now that the swelling has gone down,” He added, as the cloth stopped short of the towel-clad ankle.

“It's hardly a one-man job,” Will reasoned, “I'd need help, Matthew’s at least.”

Hannibal seemed to consider the possibility of running water, he fell silent for a moment.

“A supply run would be necessary, several even.”

Will opened one eye to regard the man bathing him. “Only one,” it was passive, barley an argument, “If we go to the right place.”

Hannibal's hand stilled then, cloth drooping damp against Will's shoulder where he had been delicately cleaning around the stitches.

“We?” He asked, some of the softness gone from his features.

Will felt himself tense minutely, but willed himself to speak anyway.

“Hampson, Matthew and I.”

“And you?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

Will tried to sit upright, inhaling sharply through clenched teeth when the angle tugged at his ankle. Hannibal pressed him back with one hand and Will huffed indignantly.

“It's just that I-”

“No.”

The weight behind the look he was given then made it more than clear that the conversation was over. Will might have argued more, but he remembered being plunged under the surface of the water and restrained there by Hannibal's hand in the very same tub. He shrunk in on himself a little and allowed the bathing to continue in silence for a moment.

“The last two times you've left the safety of the house you've nearly died.” Hannibal pointed out, clearly feeling as though there was much left unsaid. “I won't allow it.”

Will looked away from him then, eyes scanning the condensation on the tiles by his head.

“You don't need to remind me how little control I have over my own life,” he spat, feeling suddenly exposed and wishing he could pull his legs up to his chest. “Can't have your plaything dying on you.”

Will braced himself, prepared for some sort of punishment, but Hannibal merely sighed and got to his feet, crossing the room to gather the fresh towels he'd laid out.

“You've had a traumatic experience Will, so I am willing to overlook your incivility.”

How *big* of you, Will wanted to mutter, but he had already pushed his luck enough for one day. He allowed himself to be helped from the tub, mindful of the fact that his face was pressed against the curve of Hannibal's neck, and more mindful still that he had grown partial to the musky cedarwood scent there.

“I know you see me as the enemy, but in reality I never want any harm to come to you.” Hannibal sat Will on the closed toilet seat as he spoke, wrapping a towel around him, not at his waist but pulled over his shoulders like a blanket.

He brought another to wet curls and knelt before Will to dry them gently, quickly forgetting any transgression on Will's part when he leant subconsciously into Hannibal's touch.

“I just feel-” Will trailed off, placidly dazed beneath the tendrils of warm steam surrounding them both.

“How do you feel Will?” Hannibal remained where he was, falsely innocuous.

Will sighed, bringing his fingers to the bridge of his nose. “Confused,” He admitted grudgingly.

“Oh?” The smile was entirely internal, lest it cause Will to withdraw.

“I-I don't know what I *want*,” The heady mixture of water-warmed skin and Hannibal's hand now caressing his scalp, under the pretence of fixing damp hair, was mired with the pain of his injuries. Together the sensation had him feeling quite muddled and he wanted, if only this once, to just forget his position and truly accept what Hannibal was offering him.

“Can you help me back to the bed?” He asked, after several moments of internal debate.

Hannibal was all too happy to oblige, tucking his body up into his arms as if he weighed nothing and setting him naked between the sheets. Will's glasses rested crooked on the

bedside table and Hannibal slipped them onto his face, carefully, as not to damage them further. They had been found on Mason's unconscious body, almost unsalvageable, but Matthew had managed to bend the frame back into a semblance of their previous shape.

He set about bandaging Will's ankle then, tight enough that it would set right, even with the agony it caused his captive for him to do so.

“I need something for the pain,” He gritted out through his teeth.

“I may have something to take the edge off.”

Will nodded desperately, not caring what it was so long as it worked.

Hannibal retrieved his medical bag from the sitting room, placing it at the foot of the bed when he returned to Will and sifting through its contents.

“This is Toradol,” he said, selecting a 2ml vial and tearing a new syringe from its packaging. “I would have given it to you last night, only it was unsafe with the state you were in.

Will watched him hold the tiny, clear container up to the light, “But it's safe now?” He asked, as the needle pierced through the film lid.

“More or less.”

It wasn't as reassuring an answer as Will would have liked, but if he were totally honest, he was more than willing to risk it if it lessened the pain he was in. He held out his arm as Hannibal approached, watching the metal tip pierce his skin and feeling a foreign warmth spread through the vein there.

“How do you even have this stuff?” He asked, laying back to await the effects of the medication.

“I was always an unorthodox medical practitioner, and so I used unorthodox means to get what I felt my patients needed.” Hannibal placed the empty vial and syringe on his desk to be discarded later. “It should take ten minutes for you to feel the effects.”

“You got this illegally?” Will asked, a little nervous that anything could be coursing through his system if Hannibal had been lied to.

“I had a very reliable supplier,” Hannibal assured him, reclining on the bed beside Will and folding his hands in his lap. “When things took a turn for the worst, I bought up everything he had.”

“Huh, well thanks.”

“You're welcome, Will. Like I told you before, I don't wish for you to suffer.” Hannibal gazed down at him pointedly, amused by the way he shifted under his gaze.

They stayed like that in silence for a few moments, Will willing the drug the hurry up while Hannibal watched him placidly, apparently content to do so for the foreseeable future.

“You don't have to stay with me, you know,” he mumbled eventually, “if you have things to do.”

“Nothing requires my immediate attention.”

“Oh, okay.”

Will felt a large, warm hand settle where the nape of his neck met his spine. He didn't pull away, allowing his keeper to massage away some of the tension there.

“I think it's starting to work,” He sighed, allowing himself to sink further into Hannibal's touch.

“I'm glad to hear it,” Hannibal let his hand drop so that Will was encompassed within the weight of his right arm.

He lay there, content to rest against Hannibal's side, and thought about how he would have suffered if he'd managed to get away properly this time. If he had found shelter, he would have been broken and alone and in so much pain. But with Hannibal everything was soft and painless and fuzzy around the edges.

“I'll always protect you, Will.” His keeper promised, as if reading his mind, his voice a rumble against Will's ear.

Will hummed his thanks and buried his face deeper in the man's shirt.

Chapter 21

Pain all but erased, Will was feeling rather talkative, supported in the crook of Hannibal's arm.

They had stayed that way, as the drugs kicked in, spread out on the bed together.

“So, I use to turn at the side of the road, where the bus was supposed to stop for me, and hide in the reeds by the river instead.” Will said, answering Hannibal's query in regards to his time in high school.

“You harboured a negative attitude towards education.”

Will shook his head slightly, tensing for the pain it should have caused, only to relax when he felt blissfully numb instead. “Not education, I would catch up on my reading assignments on the days I skipped, sometimes I walked to the library and read the history books there.”

He let his eyes wander across the opposite wall of Hannibal's room, visualising the shelves of dogeared paperbacks, that he would spend hours lingering between, in the place of the writing desk and heavily adorned walls.

“You were always an avid reader then.” Hannibal looked to his bookcase as he spoke, noting that Will had almost made his way through the entire collection.

The younger man hummed his agreement, feeling an unpleasant twinge in his chest as he allowed himself to think back to his life with his father for the first time in years. The man had been oblivious to his truancies, perhaps the school had tried to contact him, but their phone was disconnected more often than not, and he rarely made it to parent evenings between all the odd jobs he had to take on to keep them afloat.

“What are you thinking?” Hannibal murmured from beside him.

“That I'm glad my father passed away before the world fell apart.”

“Oh?”

Will's brow creased as he wondered why he'd felt the need to share that titbit. It was hardly a topic for light conversation with one's captor. He ran the tip of his thumb over the red pinprick in the bend of his arm.

“Hannibal...what did you give me?”

“Toradol.” He answered, more or less truthfully, the even tone of his voice giving nothing away.

“And?”

“A cocktail of psychoactive medications, a truth serum of my own making, if you will.”

“But I haven't lied,” He said quietly, feeling a little betrayed and more than a little stupid for not expecting it in the first place.

He twisted away from Hannibal's grip and was relieved when the man didn't immediately pull him back.

“No, but you've withheld information I would rather you shared with me, about your particular skill in reading people and your intentions within my camp.”

“Intentions?” He screwed up his face, wanting to declare that his *intentions* were to get as far away from the man as he possibly could. The words felt wrong, even just floating inside of his head, and he couldn't get his mouth to form them anyway.

“I hardly came here by choice,” he opted to say instead.

“Perhaps I could have worded my sentence better,” Hannibal remained reclined in the bed, seemingly unaffected by the way Will had distanced himself, teetering at the edge of the mattress as far as his propped leg would allow. “Now that you are here, how do you envision your future with us?”

“I have a choice?” It was meant to sound rancorous, so Will silently cursed himself when he heard how hopeful he sounded instead.

“Not in being here,” Hannibal stated firmly, “If you tried to leave every day, I would spend the rest of my life bringing you back.”

“Why not just kill me already,” Will muttered, “less trouble.”

Hannibal raised his eyes to the coffered ceiling in thought, as if considering his own declaration.

“I find my life more...colourful, with you in it.” He turned his head to assess his captive. “I enjoy you.”

Will huffed, ignoring the spark that lit his insides up at what constituted as a compliment from the man he had come to rely on so fully.

“I'm sure you would enjoy *eating* me just as much,” Will said, wondering why he seemed set on convincing the man to cannibalise him.

“I would, very much.” Hannibal affirmed, eyes crinkling in amusement, “but it would bring me only momentary enjoyment, while allowing you to live may bring me years of gratification yet.”

Silence fell between them as Will turned the words over in his head. He was more or less safe. In truth, Will had known this for quite some time, even if he had not consciously acknowledged the fact.

“Well I certainly don't *enjoy* you.” Will said eventually, lowering his eyes to his hands that were now twisted in his lap.

“What *are* your feelings towards me?” It was said so smugly, Will hated himself for giving the man such an easy opening.

He opted to say nothing at all.

“I'm a very patient man, Will. I assure you I can wait for your reply as long as necessary.”

Will shook his head stubbornly.

“I should tell you that I have a plethora of concoctions in my medical bag, I'm sure we can find the right one-”

“Fine!” Will said hastily, just as Hannibal made a move the retrieve it.

He took a deep breath, unsure what words were about to spill out of him.

“I feel-” Will looked to the boarded window, then the harpsichord and the writing desk, not keen to explore this part of himself, “-reliant.”

“Is that all?”

Will told himself he was imaging the thread of hurt in Hannibal's voice, so buried beneath the thick, assured accent.

“Safe,” He amended after a moment, “and-”

“And?”

“I don't mind, terribly, spending time with you.”

Hannibal went to speak, only to be cut off.

“I know what you've done, I'm not stupid. I know you've fostered this dependency, I know I should hate you but I just...don't”

“The societal norms you cling to tells you that you should feel resistant towards me,” Hannibal reached out tentatively, placing a grounding hand on Will's shoulder. “It's a society where independence and autonomy are valued traits. It's an outdated model, it doesn't fit this new world.”

“You've certainly held onto *your* own autonomy,” Will reasoned, leaning back into the touch regardless.

“In order for one to be reliant, another must be in control. In order for one to feel safe, another must be vigilant and unwavering.”

Will sighed, shaking his head but not in argument. He allowed Hannibal's hand to trail down to his forearm and didn't resist when the man tugged him back towards him.

“I know you can see things the way I do, Will.”

It was the truth, it was all too easy to slip into Hannibal's shoes and view the world through the eyes of a cannibalistic commander.

“You resemble a psychopath,” Will thought aloud, turning towards Hannibal's side so that his words were muffled, his face hidden, “but you're not. You're something else, something *more*.”

“You flatter me.”

Will snorted in exasperation.

“It's not that you don't feel, you just feel differently. More simply really.”

“Oh?”

Will could tell he'd peaked the man's interest.

“You can be apathetic to many things, but when you do care, you care vehemently. Overwhelmingly. *Obsessively*.”

Will pressed his lips tightly together, wondering if he had said too much. Hannibal seemed to be considering Will's evaluation, perhaps mildly offended that the truth, and it was the complete truth for Will could not lie, made him sound so elemental.

“And all of that obsessive care applies to you, Will.” He murmured eventually, knowing that his own past psychiatrist would have used the same words to describe his attachment to Will if she had survived the apocalypse and joined him.

“That shouldn't make me feel so contented.”

“But it does?”

“It does.”

Chapter 22

The death of Mason Verger was a bigger event than any Will had attended before. Public execution clearly still held its appeal. The entire community gathered together in front of the boarded up mansion where a large wooden pole had been erected, staked solidly into the earth. Verger hung from it, wrists bound with coarse rope to a metal attachment that resembled a mooring ring, his bare toes hovering just above the ground. Verger's clothes were torn and crusted with dried mud and russet blood stains. A wooden trestle table had been placed beside him, the weathered surface warm beneath the midday sun that sat partly obscured by a backdrop of thickening clouds like a spotlight above the scene. The ground around him was still barren of grass, though the mud left behind was cracked and dry with the aridity of early spring. In its entirety, the spectacle was not unlike a Bronnikov painting that Will had seen as a child.

Will sat on one of the dining chairs, that had been carried out for him, at Hannibal's side. He had been quiet since leaving Hannibal's room, aware that the last dregs of the serum were yet to leave his system but noting Mason's semi-conscious state, he decided to ask what was wrong with him. He had imagined the man would scream and cuss until his last breath.

“He's merely dosed on chloral hydrate,” Hannibal answered, motioning for a woman with a heavy bucket to approach the pole. “I believe you're familiar with its effects.”

Will remembered the ambush in the woods, the sting of a needle and the ensuing struggle to remain awake. He hummed his agreement.

“I didn't think they'd all want to watch,” He said, motioning to the semi-circle of people, staring with perplexity as the woman with the bucket poured its contents over Mason's head in an attempt to stir him. The water dripped from the tips of his matted hair as his head lolled forwards.

“Another one of our traditions,” Hannibal raised his voice slightly so Will could hear him over the sputtering of a newly awoken Verger. “The opportunity was missed when I decided to keep you, and then missed a second time when I focussed on treating you instead of killing the two captives my men had found.”

Will looked more closely at the congregation, noting the general hum of excitement among them. Some, namely Peter, Frederick and Freddie, were pale faced and nervous but almost everyone else seemed eager to watch the event unfold.

“They must hate me,” Will murmured, “for ruining it the last two times.” He shuddered, imagining all that murderous intent focussed on him.

Hannibal tilted his head in consideration, “I'll make it up to them,” he reasoned, “I've been told I put on quite a show.”

“Cordell!” Verger's voice cut across the crowd and Will turned to find the man being addressed, behind him. “Cordell do som'hing, cut 'e down!” He ordered, speech slurred and

stunted by the lack of functioning lips, only to be ignored by the man who clearly valued his own life above Mason's.

“Francis, hel' 'e!” He tried next, then, “Ham'son, don' jus' stand there!”

Hannibal watched each 'friend' turn away from Verger in turn, with a glimmer of amusement. The crowd began to jeer then. Pack mentality, Will noted, remembering how the same people had swarmed for his execution almost six months before.

“How will you do it?” Will asked, stomach churning at the thought of some macabre crucifixion or impalement, even as a small part of him leaned towards joining the others in their chant for his death.

“That depends,” Hannibal bent slightly at the waist, so his voice could be heard only by Will, lips practically brushing against the shell of his ear. “What did he do to you?”

Will squinted up at him, the early spring sun prying at the hand he used to shield his eyes. “You already know what he-”

“All of it.” Hannibal cut him off.

“Now?”

“It's the only way I can make my verdict.” Hannibal said plainly, as if that much were obvious.

“He um-” Will looked back at the man, cursing himself for feeling pity but feeling it nonetheless.

“He hit my head against the tree-”

Hannibal hummed encouragingly, he already knew that much. Will bit his lip, stalling. He could already tell by the intensity behind Hannibal's eye that the more he disclosed, the worse this would be. It wasn't that Mason didn't deserve to die, if Will had to pick someone of course it would be him, but he was unsure he could stomach seeing his captor at work when truly incensed.

“When I woke up he threatened to kill me, to rape me-” *Oh crap. The serum had most definitely not left his system.*

Hannibal's upper lip curled in anger and he strode forward, effectively ending their conversation.

It took only his presence beside the pole to bring the rowdy spectators down to a hushed whisper. There was a palpable tension, a fervent anticipation, as Hannibal's eyes roamed over Mason's body, over the *canvas*.

Finally, he turned towards the others, eyes meeting Will's, and announced in a frighteningly calm voice:

“Ling Chi.”, with a nod to Matthew who disappeared into the house.

The gathering erupted then, in a flurry of thrilled cheers and shocked gasps. Above it all, Mason's futile screaming. Will stared on, confused but with the chilling notion that he would not want to witness whatever Hannibal had planned.

“The lingering death,” Matthew supplied, upon returning from his errand. Will chose to ignore the hint of excitement in his voice.

He had emerged with a large leather duffel bag and a roll of brown butcher paper, and joined Will after placing them at Hannibal's feet.

“He's done this before?”

“No, but he's made subtle threats it in the past, to keep people in line,” Matthew snorted and looked over the quivering mess that was Mason verger, “guess Verger should've taken him seriously.”

Will had to agree.

He fidgeted nervously in his seat as Hannibal slipped out of his suit jacket, revealing a crisp white shirt and Harris-tweed waistcoat, keeping his eyes on Will the entire time. He removed his cufflinks next, handing the items off to someone Will did not bother to acknowledge, before rolling the sleeves back in three precise folds, entirely collected and in no particular hurry. There was an intimacy in these actions, gazes locked as they were. A peculiar tension gripped Will's stomach under the intensity of Hannibal's stare, his eyes more crimson than maroon.

“I command the death of this man,” Hannibal began, his words certain and brimming with authority, silence reigned once more, “for daring to try and take from me what is mine.” It seemed he would not abandon his tendency towards melodrama even in this. *Especially* in this.

Will felt his breath hitch in his throat. He had quickly gathered that the man was ostentatious, theatrical even, in his kills and the preparation of their bodies. This was more than that though, this was *personal*. The magnitude did not go unnoticed by those around them. Matthew leaned closer in anticipation, to such an extent that he had to place a hand on the back of Will's chair to steady himself. The whispers turned to reticence around them, it was as if the birds themselves had perched quietly to witness the retribution. Mason took this opportunity to wail, the pitch of it setting the trees to tremble with the flight of flustered animals.

Hannibal's eyes left Will's then, and he exhaled, blinking himself back to reality. Peter was quivering, cheek pressing hard into his shoulder, and Will wished belatedly that he had at least tried to bargain with Hannibal to excuse the man. Beside him stood Frederick, chest puffed out in a mockery of a braver man. Will could see through it, though he found it hard to pity him when he had been so proud to present Will as his own kill.

“The eyes first,” Hannibal announced, voice cutting clearly through the distress of his subject.

He retrieved a metal contraption, something closely resembling a melon baller with a serrated edge, and his design began to lay itself out for Will, unfurling like a moth from a chrysalis, in order to be better understood.

“It makes the wait between each cut more excruciating,” He said, voice breaking barely above a whisper. His stomach churned, but wrapped within the nausea was a sick sense of fascination. His words went unacknowledged by Matthew, who was equally caught up in the performance.

Will could feel it within himself, the brutal apprehension that blindness would bring. He squeezed his eyes shut, and upon opening them, deliberately tuned his empathy towards Hannibal. Rather than Mason’s crippling fear, he felt Hannibal’s self-assured mastery. Where despair should be he felt Hannibal's ardour instead. Two strides across the kicked-up ground brought him face to face with his thrashing victim. One hand gripped his hair unforgivingly while the other raised the gleaming instrument towards the left eye, stupidly wide with fright. Will felt his heart stutter, despite Hannibal's own undoubtedly steady pulse, as the eyeball bulged with a squelch and the tearing of the optic nerve. The sounds Mason made were inconsequential, he was not the centre of attention, it was Hannibal putting on the performance after all. He was the one to be appreciated and revered here, and Will had yet to realise that he was doing exactly that.

Their eyes met again, after both of Mason's had been removed and tossed to the ground, and Will could feel Hannibal's thoughts thrumming through his own mind. *This, so far, we have done together. Maimed Mason's face beyond repair, taken respectively his ability to see and to speak, so undeserving was he of such capabilities.* Hannibal was overcome with elation, and Will could hardly separate his own feelings, what with Matthew also pouring his twisted glee over Will's shoulder.

Hannibal stepped away then, placing his bloodied hands flat on the table for a moment before rolling out two thick sheets of butcher paper, one over the other. Again, he did so unhurriedly, as if oblivious to the writhing creature behind him. It was all part of the punishment, Will knew, let the pig stew in its juices while it waits.

A knife was selected next, curved as if the weapon itself were grinning, and Will watched the flesh of Mason's left thigh peel away smoothly, even before Hannibal had approached him to do just that. The strip of flesh was laid out, raw and tender on the butcher paper and wrapped lovingly with Hannibal's dexterous hands. Once removed from the squealing swine, the meat became precious. It would nurture them, and Will wondered if he were still merely reflecting Hannibal when he decided it was a far better use for the man.

“We're eating well tonight,” Came Matthew's voice from behind him, but Will was too engulfed in Hannibal's work to reply.

Symmetry is important, Will thought, when the knife was not discarded and Verger's right thigh followed the same fate as his left. *This is art*.

Will watched as piece by piece the flesh was lain out and wrapped with all the care of a gourmet fillet. But this wasn't butchery, it was something far more elegant. His temples began to pulse, still chasing away the drugs in his system, as he slipped further still into Hannibal's mindset. Mason survived the flaying of his chest and the loss of six fingers before losing consciousness. By this point, the sun was no longer so high in sky and Will's brain was throbbing inside of his skull with the effort to stay connected to Hannibal's design. The branches of nearby trees cast gnarled shadows that twisted like talons over Mason's bloody and exposed flesh. Great demonic hands waiting to drag the last dregs of life from him.

As if in acquiescence, Hannibal retrieved a scalpel from his brown bag and drew it across Mason's neck with no more thought than one would take in plucking weeds from the ground. He took a moment to appreciate the gush of thick red and the way in which Verger could only twitch in acknowledgement of his own demise. It was as if Will felt the slice of the jugular and snap of tendons beneath his own hand, his fingers jerked in recognition.

He took in a deep shuddering breath, scenting blood in the air, as Hannibal sliced beneath the corpse's ribcage and slid his hand, up to his elbow, inside. Will grew dizzy as the tacky warmth trickled between his fingers, no, *Hannibal's* fingers, and then in one swift motion the heart was torn from its bone prison and presented, like a token, to Will. Hannibal smiled, all twisted lips and pointed teeth and despite himself, Will found himself smiling back. And then numbness came, as Hannibal directed the others in harvesting the rest of the meat and Will sat still, listening only to the buzzing between his ears.

"You should rest again, before Dinner."

It took a moment for him to acknowledge that Hannibal was no longer stood where Will's absent gaze remained, and was instead gathering him up in his arms. He allowed his head to rest against the man's chest, burdensome as it suddenly was to hold it up himself, and watched over his shoulder as they made towards the house, oblivious to the tacky blood on the Hannibal's shirt. Those left behind were equipped with bone saws and meat cleavers. Will spared one last glance to the annihilated corpse of Mason Verger, before nuzzling into Hannibal's neck and willing himself to feel nothing at all.

When back in the quiet of their room, Will propped on the edge of the bed, an air of uncertainty seemed to stretch between the two men. Hannibal did not remove his soiled clothing, nor did he make a move to caress Will's face as he so often did. Instead, he remained standing with an expression akin to that of a disquieted child, weary and unsure. Will bit his lip, not knowing what to say to break the silence, and Hannibal's eyes flicked down to track the movement. Will had never once witnessed the man acting anything other than poised and self-assured, there was ambiguity here and it was both thrilling and frightening.

Hannibal seemed uncaring that his mask had slipped, perhaps because Will had witnessed his design so fully only moments ago. He finally took a step forward, then another, eyes darkening as they bore into the younger man's. Will drew a deep breath as his keeper bent at the waist and found himself leaning forward almost involuntarily; perhaps still mirroring him, perhaps not.

Breath hot on each other's faces, Hannibal's near covered in blood and Will's cheek smeared from the remnants on Hannibal's dress shirt, they took a moment just to experience their proximity.

And then their lips met in ardent synchronicity, and a heady blend of chaos and fervour overcame them both until they were lost in the thrust of tongues and tug of teeth, images of split veins and cracked bone flashing behind closed eyes.

“For you,” Hannibal managed in a near growl between kisses.

Will gasped a breath through trembling lips, eyes brimming with tears and bright with the strife behind them and whispered;

“It's beautiful.”

Chapter 23

Spring was for healing.

Will's torn skin tugged itself back together again as hyacinth bloomed in the garden below the window, petals as purple as the bruises cloaking his ankle. After a week it no longer throbbed so badly to roll out his injured shoulder in the way Hannibal had directed. Another eight days and he could hobble to the bathroom without assistance, with only the aid of the smooth, wooden splints Hannibal had inserted beneath his bandages.

The boards on the windows were removed each morning, so that Will might not feel so enclosed as he had once, in a suffocatingly small room downstairs. Still, hospital rooms had had TVs for a reason, and Will found himself twitching with the desire to do something, *anything,* in the midst of his boredom. Hannibal brought him books from elsewhere in the house, even yielding to Will's pleas to read those that his keeper considered unworthy of the title 'literature'. Some of the authors Matthew frequented hardly seemed literate at all.

If silver linings existed, then Will's was that his friendship with Peter was restored. It had been a shock, to them both, when Hannibal had allowed the quivering man past the threshold of his room, but someone had to keep Will accounted for when Hannibal was busy with more tedious matters. The men spoke of chickens and dormice. When Peter was a boy, he had spotted a mouse with a missing foot, creepy past his breakfast table. He'd laid grains out in the conservatory for it, much to his mother's ire, even constructing a tiny home for it out of wooden building blocks. Will found the tale particularly charming, and shared his own childhood forays into caring for orphaned raccoons. They found they could have leisurely conversations, now that Will needn't scratch every word into the ground. It was on one notably stifling morning, Will would guess in middle of May, that Hannibal interrupted one such conversation.

“It's time for the next step in your recuperation,” He announced, with a nod of dismissal to Peter, who wasted no time in vacating the chair beside the bed and making himself scarce.

“What does that entail?” Will asked, repositioning himself in the bed to make room for Hannibal, who always insisted on sitting pressed up against him rather than on the desk chair or chaise lounge.

They had been increasingly intimate of late, personal space a thing of the past, though they hadn't kissed since the execution. Will often found himself revisiting that moment between them, playing it over and over in his mind from every angle, even if he did shy away when Hannibal seemed likely to repeat the gesture. His own indecisiveness irritated him. It had been so long since he had been with another, and never before a man, but the lack of morality in it still tugged at him incessantly. It was hard to tell exactly when the act of succumbing to his captor had stopped being just a ruse to escape. He was mostly content with their newfound proximity while he figured it out. Hannibal had draped himself around Will the

second night after escaping Mason's clutches, and there was hardly the excuse of hypothermia to justify his actions, or indeed, their shared nudity. Still, Will slept better in the cage of the man's arms, as ironic as that was.

“I think you'll be happy to hear that it entails leaving these four walls.”

“*Very* happy,” he agreed, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, incredibly eager to escape his prolonged claustrophobia.

“Slowly, Will,” Hannibal sighed, though it was oddly fond. He reached out to pull the younger man back against him. “You don't even know where we're going yet.”

“Anywhere at all,” Will replied, placing his forehead to Hannibal's shoulder with a breathy laugh. “God, *please*.”

A thoughtful hum.

“Perhaps a walk through the garden,” Hannibal suggested, placing a hand to the back of Will's head to keep him close a moment longer. “A *slow* walk,” he warned.

“Mmm hmm,” Will nodded into his shirtsleeve, as much as Hannibal's near-crushing grip would allow.

The stairs proved to be a hurdle, and Will was slightly surprised when Hannibal didn't just scoop him up and carry him down himself.

“You need to learn to work around your condition,” He offered, by way of explanation, but did extend his arm for support.

Will clung to it with both hands, pressing his toes tentatively to the first step and hissing when the pain proved unbearable.

“Keep your foot flat,” Hannibal intoned, silently revelling in Will's tightening grip on his forearm.

Setting his mouth in a line of determination, Will tried again, this time with the entire bottom of his foot connecting clumsily with the wooden step.

“Good, now the hard part.”

Will huffed, already struggling to maintain his balance.

“You don't happen to have any crutches, do you?” He asked, in half-hearted humour.

“Allow me to be your crutch, Will.” Hannibal nodded for him to proceed.

“Literally or metaphorically?”

When Hannibal only looked at him, silently stern, Will sighed and shifted his weight onto his bad foot, grunting with the effort. He let his upper body rest against Hannibal's side for a

moment, as he counted the steps to the ground floor.

“Two down, twelve to go,” He muttered, with chagrin, noting the hint of a smirk play across Hannibal's lips.

When they finally reached the front door, Will was a wreck of aches and pains. Hannibal seemed only too happy to wrap an arm around the man's waist when the challenge of manoeuvring uneven ground proved too much, and Will was so use to being seen at Hannibal's mercy, that he hardly minded when the gardener's stares bore curiously into them.

The grass had grown back in thick emerald blades, still dotted with dew. Will tipped his head back and inhaled deeply, taking a moment to appreciate the cloying scent that was only ever present during the first hours of a Spring morning. Hannibal allowed him this, eyes scanning the smooth stretch of his neck and the firm line his jaw made with his head tilted that way.

When he had had his fill, they made their way across the garden. The soft, springy ground relented underfoot and Will found he was far more mobile than he had first suspected. They approached the towering fence, and Will felt a dull ache between his ribs when he remembered the hours he had spent scouring the perimeter for an escape. He peered through the chain-link to the forest beyond and shuddered. However desperate he had once been to leave for good, that had changed after spending a night in the thick of the woods with beasts on his tail.

Abruptly, the arm supporting him withdrew and Will gasped in surprise, unsteady on his feet. He toppled over, luck would have it into the fence, where he threaded his fingers through the metal to hold himself up.

“Wha-?” He started to ask, feeling panic crawl into his chest when Hannibal began to retreat.

“This is the next step, Will.” Hannibal stated simply, expression entirely passive as if this were how all Doctor's handled physical rehabilitation.

“But,” Will choked back a disbelieving laugh. He should have known a pleasant walk in the garden would come with strings attached. “If I fall I could make it even worse.”

“Then I sincerely suggest you don't fall.”

Hannibal stopped about five metres away, but it may as well have been five miles for the severity of the pain Will would have to overcome to get to him. He let his head fall hopeless against the twisted metal wire, already exhausted.

“Hannibal, please-” Will lifted his head, only to let it drop back against the fence in defeat when Hannibal merely tilted his own expectantly.

It had been one thing, to hobble from danger with his ankle all twisted and mangled when adrenaline was coursing through him, now it was daytime and he was more or less safe. He began to regret his decision to get out of bed at all. He had developed a terrible habit of ignoring the worst in his captor, in order to appreciate the best. In his longing for the man's

gentle touches and protection, he seemed to have deliberately forgotten the weeks spent in a closet sized, windowless room or his experience in being chained to a hook in the basement.

“Fine,” he sighed, pushing up from the chain-link. Hannibal may hold the upper hand, but that didn't mean Will couldn't get *anything* out of the situation. Hannibal liked to have his way, and that could be held against him. “If I do this, will you reconsider my request to help Matthew on the next supply run?”

“Absolutely not,” came the all too predictable reply, “now, walk towards me please.”

“Absolutely not,” Will parroted, heart thrumming with the absolute audacity of his actions. He slumped down with his back to the fence, wincing when his ankle bore the brunt of the quick movement.

There was a long beat of silence, his defiance clearly unexpected, and Will felt more than a little smug to be the one to leave the other stumped for once.

“I do not appreciate this childish behaviour.”

If he looked hard enough, Will would have noticed several small cracks to the edge of Hannibal's mask. He was, for once, uncertain.

“It's necessary to resort to childish behaviour, when one is treated like a child.” Will retorted, not daring to look up and meet his captor’s eyes.

The words he was speaking were dangerous enough as it was, he knew who he was talking to after all. However, he also knew that most likely, the worst Hannibal would do was revoke some of Will's privileges. Locking him away in the dark seemed like too much of a step backwards after their recent...developments.

“So, you wish to bargain then?” Hannibal had regained his composure.

Will met his eyes briefly, warily, he had not expected such an opening this soon. He told himself it could be a ploy, but then, nothing ventured nothing gained.

“I do,” Will nodded firmly, resisting the urge to add a 'please' to the end of his sentence at the risk that it might make him sound desperate.

Hannibal's eyes crinkled then, and Will frowned.

“I know what you're doing,” He said.

“Oh?”

“You're trying to make it seem like you're only humouring me, like the ball is in your court,” Will was confident in his accusation. Since he had witnessed the death of Mason Verger through Hannibal's eyes, it had become far easier to read him.

“You think it's in yours?” Hannibal asked, brows raised.

“No,” Will admitted, a little sullenly, before narrowing his eyes. “It's somewhere between the two.”

“I would wager closer to mine,” Hannibal stated casually, still maintaining the distance between them.

“The wind might blow in my favour,” Will shrugged, trying to sound nonchalant in the face of a predator with a clear advantage.

Hannibal hummed, considering, folding his hands behind his back and taking another step away.

“I could just leave you here, Will.” Hannibal pondered aloud with a smile, enjoying the game between them.

Will took a moment to let the nervous twist in his gut settle before answering.

“You'd let the beasts get me when night falls?” He laughed, hoping it sounded more confident than he felt, “and deny yourself ‘years of gratification yet’?”

Hannibal's smile grew, and this time he took a step forwards to restore their previous distance. A breeze tugged gently at their hair and the fence groaned beside them.

“Then maybe I'll just carry you back myself.”

Will's smile spread to match his.

“And then I would have won in some small sense,” He pointed out, crossing his arms over his chest boldly.

Hannibal's grin was all teeth now, anger, amusement and respect warring within him.

“I'm not often found at an impasse, Will.” He admitted, “you repeatedly delight me.”

“So?” He asked, ducking his head in an attempt to hide the blush that his keeper's words had provoked.

“So, I Will consider your request.”

“I'll need more than that.”

“You're hardly in the shape to be accompanying the other's out there yet, Will.” Hannibal pointed out, with a dismissive wave to the home-made splint strapped to his ankle. “You'd need to submit to my method of rehabilitation first.”

“And then?”

“There will be more stipulations but, yes, I suppose you can accompany the others, just this once.” Will breathed a sigh, of both relief and astonishment.

“Thank you.”

Hannibal merely hummed, as if the leniency had meant nothing to him.

Will hoisted himself up by his grip on the fence, groaning his pain into his shoulder before straightening more fully.

“Thank you,” he repeated, urging his words to carry his sincerity across the space between them.

He let his fingers slip from their support and considered the uneven ground before him. His trips to the bathroom alone had been one thing, the floor had been flat and solid furniture lay within reach at all times. This was different, and Will wobbled with the first step, almost falling completely with the second. He hesitated, one ankle hovering above the ground like an animal with an injured paw.

“Spot me for balance, Will, you're doing well.” Came the reassurance he needed, and Will set his sight on Hannibal's shirt collar to steady himself with his next steps.

As the distance shrank, the pain grew and Will could feel himself losing his determination. He let his eyes slip closed and imagined himself sat in the passenger seat of Matthews van, a cool breeze on his face and fresh, new places, zooming by. He pictured Summer rolling around, finally having his hands full with a project of his own, hoisting a water tank above his head as the sun warmed him to the bone.

He closed the rest of the distance fairly quickly then, collapsing into Hannibal's arms with a victorious chuckle, and breaking into full-blown laughter when the man tumbled beneath him, more undignified than he would ever willingly allow himself to appear. Their eyes met then and Will bit his lip, starting to push off of him with a mumbled apology, only to be rolled onto his back with Hannibal suddenly atop him, staring down with a piercing intensity. Will barely had time to catch his breath before their lips met, Hannibal crushing and possessive as his tongue darted out to explore the man beneath him. Will found himself arching into the solid body above him, thoughts fading to a pleasant static as he allowed himself to be devoured. Sharp teeth nipped at his bottom lip, not breaking the skin but hard enough to draw a gasp. When he pulled away, Hannibal took a moment to appreciate the younger man, lips dark and swollen.

“How do I know you'll come back?” He asked, and though it came out harsh as a demand, Will didn't miss the softening in his keeper's dark eyes, something not unlike worry settling within pools of maroon.

“Matthew won't let me leave,” Will replied, surprised by the hoarseness of his own voice, “nor Hampson, nor anyone else you choose to send with us.”

Hannibal didn't look convinced, but he lowered his head to claim Will's lips again, one hand leaving the side of his head to twist into his brown curls.

“If you don't come back, I'll find you,” Hannibal snarled against parted lips, tugging at the hair between his fingers.

“I know,” Will whispered, stretching up to press his forehead against his captor's, “I know.”

Chapter 24

Hannibal carried Will back to the house, lean arms looped tightly around his neck. He had done well enough and there was somewhere he would rather they both be, and as soon as possible. The mattress dipped beneath their combined weight as Hannibal lowered them across the width of the bed, resuming the position they had found themselves in outside, only this time, Will lifted his uninjured leg to wrap around Hannibal's waist to pull him closer. His small victory had left him feeling giddy and reckless and he wanted this, on some base level, even though he'd never done anything like it before, even if the thought of it frightened him most days. Hannibal's lips pressed down on his again, one hand sliding purposefully beneath his shirt to map out the warm skin there. A once hollowed stomach now ever so slightly rounded, evidence of Hannibal's nourishment. Will let out a shaky breath, nervous and wanting. The hand now trailing his chest was gentle even as Hannibal tugged a lip between his teeth and pressed, just hard enough to draw a bead of blood. Will reached up to grip a handful of silvering hair but didn't try to tug the man away. Instead he moaned, feeling a dull ache between his legs as he began to grow hard.

His lips were spared for a moment, Will's tongue darting out to taste copper, as Hannibal's trailed feather-light kisses along his jaw and neck, pausing above his pulse to inhale the heady scent of his jittery arousal. He nipped the skin there, feeling his own cock swell with the hitch in Will's breathing. He was achingly hard before he had even tugged the borrowed shirt open to reveal Will's chest, but he had waited patiently to have this man beneath him, and he would not rush it now. He allowed his fingers to circle a nipple, pinching just so, to hear the man's small gasp and watch him arch up into the touch.

“So responsive,” His words came out deep and throaty, “how long have you ached to be touched in this way, Will?”

A small moan. Will thrust his hips up to meet Hannibal's, their lengths pressing against one another through their clothing and drawing a groan from them both.

“Too long,” he whispered into Hannibal's throat, pressing a kiss of his own there.

He kicked his shoes off, wincing when his ankle protested the treatment, watching their descent and wondering distantly if Hannibal's men would hear the thump of leather soles hitting the floor and run in on them this way. Hannibal gripped a handful of his hair, tugging as a reprimand for allowing his mind to wander. Deft hands unbuttoned his trousers and Will lifted his hips to help Hannibal ease them from his legs and discard them on the floor behind him. His briefs were next and so he was left suddenly bare beneath a fully dressed, and rather smug looking, Hannibal. A ruddy blush spread from his neck up to his cheeks and Will momentarily doubted his own willingness in this act. That is, until Hannibal's hand closed around his cock and pulled down in one swift motion, tearing a guttural sound from the man beneath him. Will balled his hands in the ridiculous sateen sheet, wishing he had the nerve to reach up and tear Hannibal's own clothing from his body. Hannibal drew his hand up again, the tight warmth threatening to send Will over the edge, it had been that long, and ran the tip

of his thumb over the slit. Will bucked up towards him with a sound not unlike a whimper, but managed to reach one hand up to tug at the man's shirt collar.

“Please Hannibal,” He managed between his panting, “I want-” His words sputtered out on a moan as Hannibal started to work his cock faster.

“What do you want Will?” He asked, or more accurately growled, but he was already tugging at his shirt buttons with his free hand.

Will reached up tentatively to help him.

“*You*, I want *you*.”

When, exactly, he had started to want Hannibal is this way, it was hard to say. His captor had taken over each aspect of his life so that now, Will could not imagine anyone else he would rather have with him, above him, *in* him. Will pushed the unbuttoned shirt from Hannibal's shoulders, mourning the momentary loss of contact when he inevitably had to release Will's length to allow the fabric to slip from his arms. He writhed eagerly when that was done, anticipating the firm heat returning to his cock, and so tensed when a finger came to circle his hole instead.

This was uncharted territory, made all the more daunting by the dark ferocity in the eyes of the man above him. Hannibal's hair had fallen from the style in which he usually tamed it, strands hanging down over heavy lidded eyes. He nudged Will's thighs apart gently to make room for himself between them and knelt there, breathing deeply, made ravenous by the prurient sight before him. His knuckle trailed Will's inner thigh up and up just inches from his cock so that Will was practically keening for the touch, still wary of the other hand, which was attending to the pink puckered skin between his cheeks. He wanted to reach up, stroke his fingers through the salt and pepper hair on Hannibal's chest, bite and draw blood the way it had been drawn from him. Before he could commit to either, Hannibal was withdrawing from him, reaching steadily from his position on the bed to pull a small glass vile from the bedside table. He allowed some of the substance to trickle onto his fingers before returning his attention to Will's ass, committing the crimson blush this caused to the most eminent room of his memory palace. He slipped one finger in, just to the first knuckle, feeling Will's warmth tense around the intrusion as the man in question emitted a small, surprised sound from the back of his throat.

“Relax, Will,” Hannibal purred, pressing it in further, wondering how he would ever find anything as magnificent as this, a naked wanton Will, again.

Will obliged, allowing himself to unfurl, and was rewarded with a hungry kiss that swallowed the sound he made when a second finger was added alongside the first.

“So good, Will.” The praise slipped unchecked from thin lips, and it was worth it to hear the eager, wordless reply.

He scissored his fingers, working open the unrelenting tightness and shushing Will when his pleasured moans turned to something more pained and uncertain. He allowed the younger man a moment to adjust to a third finger, bringing his other hand up to stroke brown curls

from his sweat-damp forehead and kiss away a tear from the corner of his eye. When Will's breathing slowed to something more controlled, Hannibal slipped his fingers free, admiring the way the man's hips rolled after them.

His own cock was swollen painfully, pressing hard against the inside of his trousers. He stepped down from the bed, letting them puddle on the floor, not hesitating to drop his briefs thereafter. He spared a glance to Will, in time to see wide eyes locked between his legs and his adam's apple bobbing nervously. Hannibal paused, glanced down at his own cock, as if reassessing the size and when his eyes met Will's they were crinkled with that familiar fondness, visible even through the darkened irises.

“One day I will have you completely,” it sounded like a promise and a threat in one breath. Hannibal leaned forward across Will's body, lips brushing the shell of his ear. “Not that,” he whispered, “not today.” And Will was unsure whether he should feel relieved or disappointed.

Regardless, he had very little time to think about it before freshly slicked fingers pushed back inside of him, curling just so to ignite his insides. The sound that was torn from his throat was primal, obscene, and Will nearly choked when the motion was repeated, fingers pressing unforgivingly against the bundle of nerves inside him.

“Fuck,” he groaned on impulse, eyes flicking nervously to his captor's to assess the reaction his language had caused.

He could look into him so clearly like this, when they were so intimately connected, and so was relieved to find only a brief flicker of amusement beneath near overwhelming lust. His lips were bitten again, a playful admonishment. This time, when the fingers curled to wrack Will's body with aching pleasure, Hannibal leant down so that their bare cocks were touching, and rolled his hips against him. They groaned into one another's mouths. Will could hardly reciprocate, entirely undone, and so Hannibal gripped their lengths firmly in his free hand and began to stroke them together.

Will cried out, completely and utterly overstimulated, and gripped Hannibal's shoulders tight enough to leave bruises as he came in thick white streaks between them. Hot white light frizzled behind closed eyelids and then faded to a pleasant grey static as he returned to his body.

He allowed himself to be rolled over, limbs heavy and uncooperative, even lifting his hips when he realised what Hannibal had in mind for himself. He let his head rest sideways against a folded arm, mind pleasantly vacant, and squeezed his thighs as tightly as he could manage in his state. Hannibal ran a slick hand between his legs before thrusting his cock between them with a grunt and continuing to fuck him that way, so harshly that Will was distantly glad his ass had been spared. He winced when the friction of the bedsheets rubbed up against his own cock, spent and hypersensitive. When Hannibal came it was with a near-feral growl, and his seed shot hot against Will's ass. He collapsed against Will's back then, both of them mindless to the mess they had made and allowed themselves to catch their breath.

“I see now that a water tower will be a much-appreciated addition,” Hannibal eventually said, words prim even though his voice was still rough from their fucking. “I am reluctant to have Fredrick bring the buckets up with us in such a... *compromised* position.”

Will huffed a laugh from beneath him, light-headed and still buzzing from his orgasm. His ankle was tender now, the high that came with fucking quickly wearing off. Hannibal minded it as he rolled from atop Will, tugging him up the length of the bed to join him.

“Perhaps we shouldn't do this again until it's built then,” Will suggested, knowing that Hannibal would see it as the ultimatum it was, but too tired to mind his words more carefully.

He hummed in response and gathered the bed runner up to mop their stomachs clean, it was a start at least and Will was too tired to care anyway. He reached lazily over Hannibal's chest, to pluck the vile from its place on the nightstand.

“Trust you to have lube in the midst of the apocalypse,” Will snorted, tipping the glass container to see the thick substance slide down it's edges.

“Aloe vera,” Hannibal supplied, plucking it from Will's hand and tucking the man up against him more tightly, “one must always be prepared, lest they waste such a perfect opportunity as this.”

“Perfect,” Will mumbled absently as he started to slip into sleep. He was well aware that nothing really was, but in that moment he could forget the circumstances and focus on the warmth and steady breathing of the man beside him, and just pretend.

Chapter 25

“Did Hannibal lecture you again?” Will asked, shielding the smouldering sun from his eyes as they emerged from the tunnel into the blaring light of the midsummer morning.

“Uh huh,” Matthew hoisted his khaki bag a little higher on his shoulder so that he could raise his fingers and list off the instructions with an impish grin; “don't let him out of your sight, don't kill him, don't let him *get* killed,” he said, aiming to imitate the man's Lithuanian accent and failing terribly. “But nothing about makeshift weapons this time so if the van breaks down, I think you can use the screwdriver all on your own.”

“So, you're my designated babysitter then?” Will sounded more resentful than he had meant to, he sighed and tried to remind himself that being allowed on this trip at all was progress.

They stopped to let the others catch up, Will having practically jogged through the tunnel to be free of the claustrophobia that had become somewhat of an issue in the past year. Matthew, of course, had had to keep up with him and so Hampson and Frederick were left trailing behind.

“More like your bodyguard,” Matthew teased, much to Will's indignation.

“You realised I survived out here on my own for *years*, right?”

Matthew shrugged, “If you die, I'm pretty sure I do too, so I'm not taking any chances.”

Will rolled his eyes amazed that, even out here, Hannibal managed to maintain total control.

The four of them took a shortcut through the trees, following a barely trodden path that one would have to know was there to see at all. When they reached the clearing lined with parked vehicles, Will clambered easily up into the passenger seat of Matthew’s van, ankle finally healed, while the other two took a blue Chevy. Its flatbed would come in handy with the sheer size of the supplies they would need to gather.

The van started with a soft purr, thanks to Will's attention to the engine, and they were off, windows down in an attempt to cope with the stifling heat.

The ride was bumpy at first, the worn tires not designed to tackle long grass and soft soil, but Will hardly minded. The last time he had been in a moving car, he was half dead, the time before he was unconscious and the time before that the world as he knew it had only just ended and he had been dragged from his station wagon by a group of men looking for a fast way out of town.

He let his head drop back against the headrest and basked in the glow of sun on skin and the gentle breeze teasing through his curls. If he closed his eyes, he could almost pretend he was in his father's awful banger, could almost hear the calm croon of Paul Simon drifting from the stereo.

“Uh, Will,” Matthew had pulled over just as the trees started to become more sparse. He was holding a thick hessian sack and biting his lip apologetically.

“You're kidding, right?” Will seethed, wondering why he couldn't be allowed to forget his position as captive, even for a moment.

“'Fraid not,” Matthew shoved it forward insistently, “It's just for a while, until we're far enough away from anything recognisable.” He inclined his head in thanks when Will snatched it from his hands, “I may not have mentioned *all* of Hannibal's rules.”

“No shit,” Will huffed, from inside the sack, and was sure he heard a half-concealed snort of amusement.

It was unbearably hot, the breeze unable to penetrate the thickly woven fabric, and he could feel sweat beginning to bead on his brow. The material was itchy and irritating and Will wondered if Hannibal had insisted on this in the hopes of deterring him from this course of action. The thought bolstered him a little and he decided he could endure this, if it meant he'd gain some small slice of freedom. Matthew tried to make conversation, but Will was hardly in the mood and so they trundled on for perhaps twenty minutes before the ground smoothed out beneath them. If Will had to guess he'd say they had turned onto a long stretch of road, perhaps a highway.

“We'll reach a small town in a few miles, I can take that thing off your head then.”

Will didn't reply, still feeling rather sour that it had been necessary at all. The small town in question would have been quaint if not for the shattered windows and scorched walls. It had once been a modest place to live, somewhere Will might have settled down if he'd had the chance, quiet enough, decent. It was entirely desolate now though, front doors swinging open or completely unhinged, porch chairs toppled and burnt black. The grates leading to the sewer system had been busted open or bent out of shape but the four of them were safe for now, in the daylight.

“Hampson is pretty sure he's seen a DIY shop not far from here,” Matthew supplied, driving vacantly with the other two in the lead. “You got that list?”

Will nodded, pulling a folded sheet of paper from his jeans pocket.

He was dressed more appropriately now. No dress shirts or pleated trousers as was the usual selection from Hannibal's wardrobe. Matthew had let him borrow a faded t-shirt and even said he could keep the jeans, that he might need them if Hannibal ever let him out again.

“Good, it's a big place, should have everything.”

They carried on until the dotted houses became high-rises and the small, barren convenient stores were swapped out for a large shopping complex. The car park was vast and empty, eerily so, and the billboard that once listed the name of the shops was now faded and peeling away. They drove straight across the white lines, now made meaningless, and parked beside the large revolving door to the DIY store. The windows were covered in a thin film of dust, but the scattered displays were still vaguely visible. The building had been looted, but not

depleted entirely. Will was confident that they would find what was needed. Very few people would have made it far enough to consider building themselves a water tower, fewer still would even know where to begin.

It took all four of them to shoulder through the revolving door, and the screech it made echoed out across the derelict space. The chances of anyone being near enough to hear them were slim, but they all tensed regardless, ready to defend themselves if need be. When no one appeared, they carried on into the building, stepping over spilled tins of acrylic paint, made thick and gooey with time, where it hadn't dried completely. Frederick, with his annoying insistence to appear independent whilst being anything but, wandered off towards the sparse rack of hammers and drills. As suspected, most had used this as a stop for weapons and the shelves displaying ram pumps and poly tanks were still well stocked. Hampson took the list with him and went in search of pressure treated wood, Will had it committed to memory and had Matthew help him lug large steel scaffolding towards the door.

“This isn't happening,” Matthew pointed out, as they both dropped the frame to the floor and took a chance to work the aches out of their shoulders.

There was an exit at the back of the shop, large sliding doors leading out to a small indoor carpark, a small, *dark* carpark. It wasn't worth the risk and the revolving door was not very accommodating.

Will rolled his eyes, Matthew's cushy postapocalyptic lifestyle more evident than ever. He selected the only remaining hammer, sporting a promising steel head, and swung his arm forward with all the strength he could muster, towards the double glazing. Matthew followed his lead, eager to join the destruction, but had to settle for the handle of an axe. Together they battered the glass until it cracked and shattered into hundreds of glistening shards, raining down on the pavement outside. Matthew raised his eyebrows at Will, impressed.

“How the hell did Frederick, of all people, bring *you* in?”

Will set his lips in a grim line, not too happy to be reminded of that fact, and motioned for them to continue working. The sun was relentless, and by the time both the van and flatbed were stocked with the necessary supplies, all four men were sore and damp with perspiration. The sun had already passed the centre of the sky but it seemed a waste not to scout the remaining shops before they left.

McDonalds, the 'M' now hanging on one hinge, did not hold anything of import. Matthew, however, insisted on retrieving several ridiculous Happy Meal toys from behind the counter which ate into the time Will would have rather spent searching the clothing store for more durable footwear. They got there eventually, spreading out to gather whatever took their fancy, and Will's attention was drawn to the men's fragrance counter, sleek black and something he would never have dared approach before the world ended. He brought a glass bottle to his nose and sprayed it, coughing when the aftershave assaulted his nostrils. The second he sampled was more favourable, and he slipped an unboxed vile into the deep pocket of his jeans without thinking too much about what he was doing.

“Shit, guys, look at this,” Hampson's voice sounded from the behind the coat rail.

Will felt his chest tighten as he rounded the corner to find a mess of fleece jackets and soft hoodies arranged into what most likely served as a sleeping space. Beside it, an empty can of spaghetti hoops.

“Damn, someone's here,” Matthew hissed, hand resting on the handle of the knife he had tucked into his waistband.

“We need to leave. *Now*.” Frederick whispered, already inching towards the exit.

Will ignored their panic, though the air around him was made thick with it. It had already occurred to him that he had survived so long alone because he hadn't needed to worry about being affected by other's weaknesses. Dogs weren't so complex in their emotions. He scooped the empty tin from the linoleum floor and lifted it to his nose, screwing his face up when he the faint scent of mold hit the back of his throat.

“Whoever it was, they haven't been here for at least a few of days,” He assured them, gaining another appreciative look from Matthew. “But we should probably make a move soon anyway, before it gets dark.”

What a strange thing, to want to get back to his prison so badly. It seemed that the weather had reached a crescendo of sorts, for when they exited the shop it wasn't to the sweltering heat they had expected, but rather bucketing rain and a sky thick with heavy clouds. The sun strained to be seen through the dark grey but to no avail, and four stomachs dropped in unison when they realised what that meant.

~

“Shit, shit, shit,” Matthew cursed, starting the ignition and practically tearing across the carpark.

It couldn't have been later than three or four in the afternoon but the monsters would hardly care so long as the scorching ball of fire in the sky was taken care of.

“We need to find cover, Matt,” Will said, trying to sound more confident than he felt, “we won't make it back in time, it's not worth the risk.”

Matthew's eyes flicked nervously to the rear-view mirror, watching the scattered glass fade into the distance “we were too loud, they would have heard us, we can't stay here.” Will agreed wholeheartedly but was stumped for alternatives.

“Where the hell are they going?” Matthew's hands tightened on the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white as Hampson steered the truck into a suburb.

“Probably looking for somewhere closer to haul up,” Will tried to reason, acutely aware that Matthew's fear was sinking through his skin to settle alongside his own.

“No, we can't, we need boarded windows-” but he was following regardless, nothing better to suggest.

They drove at a ludicrous speed through a once busy City, holding their breath with each manhole they passed. The sky gradually darkened, as if it were ticking down the minutes they had left before everything faded to black. Will pushed back into his chair, trying to steady his breathing, trying to strategize rationally, but all he could think of was how Hannibal might have been right in not wanting him to leave. The glass bottle felt too heavy in his pocket. Caught in a cycle of guilt, anger and fear, Will hadn't been paying much attention to their surroundings. When he allowed his eyes to wander up from his own hands in his lap, a lump caught in his throat.

“Stop.” He said, too quietly. The again; “Stop, Matthew, stop!”

The van screeched to a halt, the truck sputtering to a stop a few metres ahead.

“I know where we are,” He gasped, before Matthew could demand an explanation, “I know a place!”

He was grinning now, taking in the liquor store they had pulled up beside. He nudged Matthew to move from the driver seat.

“Hannibal said not to let you dr-” He was cut off by the intensity of displeasure Will conveyed in one look, and shifted awkwardly to allow Will into his seat without either of them having to leave the vehicle.

Will pressed the horn twice for the others to follow and then made a U-turn onto the road that would lead them to the overpass. It was exhilarating to finally be behind a wheel again, especially with a considerable amount of adrenaline already contaminating his bloodstream.

“Oh god,” Matthew breathed, as a gaunt, black creature began to twist and unfurl from a manhole to the side of the road.

Will's grin spread to something manic, pressing hard on the accelerator, causing the tires to whirl and screech against the wet ground. The van hit the creature with a crunch and a splatter of black blood across the windshield and Will *laughed*, invigorated. He took the left side of the road when they reached the overpass, empty in comparison to the right, which was queued entirely with the abandoned vehicles of those who tried, and failed, to leave when he demons first appeared. The Chevy chortled behind them, Frederick looking rather pallid in the passenger seat.

“There,” Will nearly shouted, still feeling rather high, “the fifth floor.”

Matthew bent in his seat to peer up at the high-rise apartment, visible exhaling in relief as he took in the planks of wood nailed across the windows.

“Five C, home sweet home.”

They practically raced up the four flights of stairs, wet feet squelching and slipping on hard tile as they went.

When they reached the apartment, Will's attention was not drawn to the familiar rusted lettering on the door, but rather the mess of matted brown fur lying stiff and still at his feet.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

To put you out of your misery...

“Winston,” Will breathed, feeling distinctly as though the air had been punched from his chest.

The sharp ridges of the dog's spine were visible through his coat, his fur matted with filth. Will dropped to his knees beside him and nuzzled into the dog's neck, mindless of the smell.

“Oh god,” he whispered, “I'm so sorry.”

Winston lifted his head, awfully feeble, but his tail strained to wag just once, in pleasure for finally having his master returned to him. Will raised a hand to stroke the side of his face in the way he liked, more gentle than he had had to be the last time he'd been with him. His fingers twitched, wanting to embrace his friend tightly but knowing it could do more harm than good.

“As charming as this is, we really nee-” Frederick's words were cut off abruptly, as Will's fist connected brutally with the side of his face, sending him sprawling against the door of 5B.

“This is *your* fault,” Will spat, stalking to tower over him and secretly delighting in the way his eyes widened with fear. “You took me away from him.”

Will raised his fist again, Frederick's nose was already bleeding but it wasn't *broken* yet. If it weren't for Hampson reaching out to grip his wrist, Will may have been content to beat him and leave him out on the street for the beasts to tear into.

“Will, let's take him inside,” Matthew cut in, though there was a particular glint in his eyes that suggested he wouldn't have been opposed to letting Will strike the man some more.

With one last glare to a rather flustered Frederick, Will jerked his hand free of Hampson's grip and bent to gently scoop Winston into his arms. He weighed next to nothing, all bone and fur and clicking joints. Matthew jerked the door open and stepped inside, appraising the little apartment.

“Kick that cushion over,” Will nodded towards the floor cushion he had spent so many evenings curled up on, huddled up to cook whatever he'd scavenged on the little butane stove.

Matthew obliged, and Will laid his friend out across it, speaking softly to him and searching his body for injuries. There were none, but he was half-starved and completely malnourished.

Will pinched the fur at the nape of the dog's neck and watched it stand stiff for a moment before sinking slowly down.

“Give me the water from your bag,” he practically ordered. He would have snatched it from Matthew himself if he hadn't handed it over so willingly. “There are bowls in the kitchen-”

“On it,” Matthew left to search through the cupboards and Will took a moment to scan the small space he had inhabited for so long.

It would almost seem like he'd been gone only a day, if not for the dust that had gathered in his absence. The stove was where he had left it, and he knew if he were to enter his old bedroom, the sheets would be tossed aside from the last time he had woken there. Hampson wandered to the window to check how securely they were boarded. Clearly happy with what he found, he slouched in the corner to rest. Frederick was wise enough to hover in the kitchen, well away from Will and his fists.

“Here,” Matthew set the bowl down and watched as Will filled it only halfway, holding the chipped china dish at an angle under the dog's nose to make it accessible. “He's pretty important to you, huh?”

Will nodded, but didn't reply until Winston's tongue darted out and began to lap the water, slowly at first, and then more desperately.

“He was all I had before-”.

Before he was taken, before he was spared, before he was given so much more.

“Hannibal packed us lunch, you know,” Matthew said, then more quietly; “we could give him Frederick's.”

Will managed a half-smile, “It's okay. If we feed him too much, he'll get worse. He can have some of mine.”

He had always shared what he found with his dog, had sometimes even gone without if Winston was looking particularly lean.

“Well, here you go,” He handed Will a plastic container filled to the brim with some sort of protein scramble; sausage, egg and vegetables flecked through with green herbs.

Winston's nose twitched ever so slightly when Will peeled back the lid. Not surprising, it smelt divine. He ate from Will's hand, just a small amount, and whined when the tub was sealed and slipped back into Mathew's bag.

“Shh, I know, I'm sorry,” Will hushed him easily, stroking behind his ears in soothing circles until the dog's eyes closed, pacified and sated.

“We should stay here tonight, and head out in the morning,” Matthew decided, peering through the slats and grimacing at what he saw there. “Jesus, Will, how did you live right next to this.”

The beasts were at each other's throats, flailing and snapping and crashing into the houses opposite.

Will shrugged, the beasts were more predictable than people, and made his way to his old bedroom. His bed lay, as expected, untouched. As though he could slip into it and sleep to wake up and find himself as he had been, before Hannibal. He flung himself across it, and sighed up at the ceiling. It was far more dismal than he remembered, the garish décor his captor preferred seemed to have grown on him. His old apartment seemed bare and incredibly depressing now. He'd sleep, then he'd wake and return. He could tell himself that it wasn't his choice, that it would be three against one if he tried anything, but he knew this place better than they did, he was more apt at surviving than they were. No, he'd wake and return because, for some reason he *wanted* to. He wanted to tend to the chickens with Peter, he wanted to fix engines with Matthew, but more than that he wanted to be held in Hannibal's arms, safe and secure. So they ate together, Winston waking again for his second helping, and then they slept in shifts, and the next morning they bundled into their vehicles to head home.

~

It had been foolish to allow Will to leave. Hannibal stood at the foot of the tunnel, glaring out into the mess of trees. They should have returned hours ago. His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides. It was a moment of weakness, to allow Will this leniency. He could only imagine how he'd orchestrated his escape, perhaps stealing a car when the others weren't looking. If that were the case, they would not be stupid enough to return without him. Perhaps he'd fought for his freedom, that particular image was not entirely unpleasant, but Hannibal would still punish him ruthlessly when he found him again. Not the room. If this experience had taught him anything it was that he needed to keep Will close. His own room then, tied to his bed. Hannibal rolled out the tension building in his neck and inhaled slowly to keep his anger in check. Not just anger, *betrayal*. It was a noxious feeling, too close to loss. The sky was already darkening, Will couldn't get far during the night. An explosion of unexpected concern swelled within him which only rankled him further, and Hannibal span on his heel to stalk back towards the house and wait till morning.

~

“Will, what are you doing?” Matthew was standing, framed by the back doors of the van, hands on his hips.

“There's no room for Winston in the front with us, so I'm sitting in the back,” Will shrugged, leaning back against one of the large poly tanks and positioning the dog comfortably in his lap.

“Will, you can't. I can't take my eye off of you.”

“I think you're taking this a little too literally, what am I going to do, throw myself out of a moving vehicle?”

Matthew sighed, “*Will*-”

“This way you don't even have to blindfold me,” Will said sardonically, motioning to the windowless metal confines.

“Fine, but I'm locking you in.”

Will flashed him a triumphant smile before the doors shut, and then settled back for a long and rather uncomfortable ride. The supplies shook and rattled around him as they drove, but it was worth it to finally have Winston in his arms. The dog slept for most of the journey, still exhausted from his emaciated state, but woke occasionally when the ride became too jarring. Will shushed him back to sleep and deliberately avoided thinking of any scenario in which Hannibal might refuse to let him keep him.

When the van finally slowed to a stop, Will was surprised to hear loud conversation the second the driver's door slammed shut. It was too muffled to make out from where he sat, but he tensed when he noticed the urgency in the voices. The heavy metal doors were thrown open, and there stood Hannibal looking...*flustered*. Not at all in the same sense as a normal human being, he was still dressed far too impeccably, and maintained his usual air of authority, but there was something wild in his eyes that calmed when they settled on Will.

“Will,” He said, entirely civil, as he took a moment to straighten the lapels of his jacket.

“Hi,” Will replied, with a sheepish smile as he watched Hannibal's attention fall to the animal in his lap. “Meet Winston.”

Chapter 27

“Emaciated,” Hannibal stated simply, motioning for Will to fold back the dog's ear to allow him to peer inside. Winston blinked and shifted on the trestle table, still too tired to do much else, but happy to be receiving the attention regardless.

Will could feel every one of his muscles tensed in anticipation. If Hannibal refused to let him keep his dog, he would fight for him, and the precious balance they had managed to maintain would be irrevocably destroyed. He allowed his hand to trail over tangled fur and willed Hannibal to be uncharacteristically charitable. It did not escape Will's attention that Hannibal had not deigned to touch the animal himself.

“No malignant diseases as far as I'm aware,” his tone and posture gave nothing away, even to Will's acute scrutiny. Then, as if there were not a breathing pile of protruding bones laid out before him, Hannibal turned away to look across the garden, apparently disinterested. His gaze fell upon the small group of people carrying the smaller supplies into the house, Frederick with a large bruise blooming under his left eye, was among them.

“I suppose Frederick was inured in your flight from the beast?” He asked, an air of warning in his inflection.

“Um-”

“I would urge you not to lie to me, Will,” Hannibal nodded towards Winston, still sprawled on the table, tongue lolling.

“I hit him,” Will murmured, taking a step closer to his dog as if to stand between him and Hannibal's wrath.

“Why?”

“I- He-” Will took a breath to calm himself.

“Why, Will?” Hannibal approached him, wrapping his fingers firmly through Will's hair and using the leverage to tilt his head so that their eyes met. It hardly hurt, but Will's breath hitched regardless.

“It's his fault,” Will whispered, blue eyes wide beneath of a gloss of tears that threatened to spill.

“*This* is his fault!” He exclaimed, a little louder.

“You hit him for the dog?”

Will realised his mistake then, reaching behind himself to place a firm hand on Winston's side. He couldn't lose him a second time. Hannibal's eyes flickered briefly to the mutt, and

Will was on the verge of begging, when he recognised the minute twitch at the corner of the man's lips.

Fingers slipped from his hair, and Hannibal began to stride away from them, towards the house.

“You may keep the dog,” he called over his shoulder, “but I won't allow him to cross the threshold until he has been thoroughly cle-” His words were crushed from him, with the impact of Will hitting his back and wrapping his arms around him. Hannibal tensed momentarily, caught completely off guard.

He was given just enough leeway to turn before Will grasped him tighter, burying his face into his chest with a sigh.

“Thank you.”

“You're more than welcome, Will,” Hannibal glanced back towards the dog-laden table, silently acknowledging that Winston was, in some ways, a blessing. “Come upstairs for a change of clothes when you're done, I'll have someone lay out the sleeping roll for your dog.”

~

“You're safe now,” Will crooned, as he lowered his friend, now washed and dried, onto his old sleeping roll, in his old room.

It seemed even smaller now that he was use to the sheer size and splendour of Hannibal's bedroom, and it still filled him with a sense of unease when he was far enough from the entrance that the door could be shut on him.

Winston had been given another small meal, and left with a bowl of water. He had even lifted his head to drink on his own, and the dread that Will had felt when he had first found him had dissolved almost entirely.

The clothing he had borrowed from Matthew was sodden with water and sweat both and he started to peel the top off before he had even reached Hannibal's door. When he opened it he was both startled and amused to find Hannibal sat, entirely naked, at his Harpsichord. One of Scarlatti's slower pieces filling the room. The door clicked shut quietly and though he was sure Hannibal had heard him enter, he didn't cease his playing, the toned muscles of his back and ass tensing irresistibly with his movements.

Will dropped his top to the floor, and was about to step out of his jeans when he felt the weight of the small box still nestled within his pocket. He slipped it safely into his hand, before undressing fully and crossing the room to stand at Hannibal's side, bare skin on bare skin.

“I did not fancy being infested with fleas,” Hannibal said by way of explanation, his fingers still dancing across the keys.

“Me neither,” Will sank beside him on the stool as he spoke, allowing their legs to brush teasingly. “I brought something back for you,” He said, more quietly, slightly uncertain.

Deft fingers stilled and Hannibal took a second to school his expression before he turned to accept the small black box being offered to him. He withdrew the sleek glass bottle from inside, examining it closely before lifting the nozzle to his nose, not needing to spray it to appreciate the rich cedarwood and hints of geranium. Will had chosen well.

He boxed it, placed it gently on the lid of the harpsichord, and pressed a gentle kiss to Will's lips.

“I thought you weren't going to return,” the admittance slipped from Hannibal unchecked, and then he kissed Will again, harder, more possessive.

He pushed his tongue passed parted lips and claimed Will's mouth, hands searching to grip Will's ass and hoist him up onto his lap so that they were pressed flush together, their hardening cocks trapped between them both.

“You were coming to get me,” Will gasped, when his lips were released, only to have them bitten in response.

“To hunt you down,” Hannibal agreed, breathlessly, nipping at his neck and groaning when Will ground his hips into him.

“You can have me,” Will murmured, running a hand through sandy-blonde hair and feeling tentative and bold all at once. “Properly this time.”

The glorious assent was all that was needed for Hannibal to stand, gripping the thighs that tightened around his waist, before toppling them both onto the bed. He ran his knuckles up along the inside of Will's leg, before pushing them both aside to make room for himself between them.

Will's hands hovered nervously above his own chest, unsure, and so he felt warm relief spread through him when they were pinned firmly above his head. He arched experimentally, testing the resistance of Hannibal's grip and was slightly surprised to find that being snared that way only made him harder.

“Perfect,” Hannibal growled, not wasting any time in slicking his fingers and pressing the first one in. “Perhaps I should keep you this way, never allow you to leave again.”

And as much as the words would have irked Will in any other circumstance, here they only seemed to make him more wanton. He shuddered as Hannibal found his prostate and only just restrained from crying out when the second finger slid in alongside the first.

A small part of Will's subconscious was reminding him that he shouldn't want this, he pressed down on the fingers inside of him to shut it up.

Hannibal stretched him almost savagely, but the kisses and nips to Will's neck and face were gentle, close to reverent. When he finally slipped his fingers free, he grasped Will's cock,

withholding anything further until Will's eyes sought his out in question.

“Completely?” He asked, voice hoarse with the strain of resisting for so long.

Will's eyes flicked to Hannibal's rigid cock, only this time the look he gave it was hungry, keen.

“Completely,” he breathed.

Hannibal slicked himself and pressed slowly in, releasing a guttural moan as the nearly too-tight warmth clenched down around him. Will let out a small choked sound, it hurt, but he had known it would. He took a deep, quivering breath, thankful that Hannibal was allowing him time to adjust.

“O-okay,” He managed, when he realised Hannibal was waiting for Will's consent to continue.

He pulled out and then thrust back in completely, hitting Will's prostate in a way that merged the pain and pleasure together into one overwhelming sensation. Will cried out, so far past trying to be inconspicuous now that he was lost in this staggering head-space.

“Oh f-fuck,” He groaned, as Hannibal started to pound into him in a steady rhythm.

It was almost too much, the pleasure, the pain, the animalistic noises falling from the parted lips of the man above him. Will felt his own need for release build and began to push back, meeting Hannibal with each thrust.

“P-please, ah-” he attempted to thrust his hips up, to have his cock tended to even as his whole body was rocked up and down the length of the bed, it's springs protesting beneath them.

Hannibal complied, tugging Will's cock with each rock of his hips until they were both teetering on the edge, bodies growing taut, breathing turning more erratic.

Will came first, unable to withstand the onslaught for long, painting white stripes across both of their bare stomachs.

Hannibal followed moments later, filling Will with his release, head hung heavy between his shoulders.

He slid out and collapsed beside Will, both men spent and panting for breath. It was easy then, for Hannibal to draw Will towards him, tucking him up in his arms and entwining their legs. He pressed a sloppy, tired kiss to the back of his neck before resting his chin atop his head.

“Mine,” he whispered, tracing circles along Will's arm.

“Hmm,” he replied sleepily, and it was agreement enough.

Chapter 28

The piercing glint of sunlight bounced from the newly erected steel frame as Will climbed the structure, metal hot beneath his hands.

“Throw the rope up,” he called down to Matthew, who was leaning against the wall of the house in the frame's shadow, wiping sweat from his brow.

“Have you never heard of taking a god damn break?” He retorted, “It's got to be at least ninety degrees out here!”

Will had burdened through the worst of the last six Summers, but even he could admit the working conditions were more than a little inhumane. He peeled off his sweat-sodden top and let it drop to the ground below, standing half bare, in only Matthew's borrowed jeans.

“Perhaps I could be of assistance,” came the accented voice of his keeper.

Hannibal had been more than a little dismayed to find that the water tower had to be fitted to the side of the house for stability, he much preferred to keep the immediate vicinity sprouting with pretty greens and dotted with flowers for the bees. It had, however, given him the near constant, exquisite view of a labouring, shirtless Will. Matthew eyed the glass carafe in Hannibal's hands, filled to the brim with water so cool that dewy condensation trickled hypnotically down it's curved edges. Even Hannibal himself had dressed for the heat, his usual waistcoat and jacket discarded, only a white dress shirt, with rolled sleeves, remaining.Will felt his exposed skin prickle under the intensity of Hannibal's stare, the man looking up at him as if the sun itself were no obstacle despite it's near blinding glare.

“I need the rope thrown up,” Will said eventually, aware that he had been silently observing Hannibal's exposed chest hair, two shirt buttons left undone.

“Of course,” Hannibal moved to place the carafe on the nearby trestle table, redistributing the collection of hammers, spanners and jig saws to make room for it. “Matthew, you may be excused.”

When they were alone, with only the murmur of voices from those tending the crops on the other side of the house, Hannibal tossed the thick rope up to Will with ease. The fact that the man could throw something so heavy just over two stories high didn't surprise Will, he was well aware of his strength.

“I'll knot this to one of these steel polls and then we can use it to hoist the poly tanks up,” he explained, eyeing the water but deciding it could wait until this, at least, was done.

He secured the rope with a bowline knot, something he had learnt from his father at the boatyard when he was a child, and walked Hannibal through the same process to attach the tank itself. Then he hoisted it up, surprised by how light it was in comparison to its size.

“What now?” Hannibal asked.

“Now-” Will straightened and felt himself sway under the heat and his own fatigue; “-I think I should take a break.”

He lowered himself steadily from the structure and lifted the carafe to his lips, the water felt sublime against the sandpaper walls of his throat and he had to resist tipping the entire thing over his head. When he'd had his fill he slipped to the grass, laying out across it with an arm thrown over his eyes to protect them from the sun. Peering through his fingers he found Hannibal staring down at him, rather fondly.

“This will be worth it you know, once I get it working,” Will sighed.

“I assure you, Will, it already is,” Hannibal eyed his tanned torso, stretched out deliciously before him and his lips twitched into a smile when a blush spread from Will's chest up to his cheeks.

The moment was immediately interrupted by the tongue of a concerned dog, who had left his basking spot to check up on his master and lave him with attention. Will chuckled and batted him away, pulling him down onto his chest when that didn't work. Winston yapped happily before bounding off, no doubt to find Peter who had proven consistently willing to throw sticks from the shade the coop provided.

“It isn't necessary for you to work so hard, Will,” Hannibal insisted, sitting beside him in the grass and managing to look infuriatingly sophisticated doing so, “we have survived this long without running water, there's no rush.”

“I like having something to work on,” Will admitted.

“And I suppose it will end the necessity of Frederick traipsing through our room,” Hannibal sighed.

Will studied his keeper but could not determine whether his words had been an accidental slip of the tongue or if it was part of the complex conditioning he was so fond of. He decided to probe.

“*Our* room?”

Hannibal smiled down at him, clearly pleased that Will had picked up on it his wording, *deliberate then.*

“We both sleep there, do we not?”

“Yeah-” Will dragged himself up to sit cross legged, “-but it's very much *your* room,” he laughed, trying to approach the situation light-heartedly, even as he realised the depth to that statement, “our tastes in décor are vastly different.”

In truth, everything happened to belong to Hannibal; the room, the house, the garden, *Will*.

“Had you any belongings, I would make room for them there,” Hannibal insisted.

Will scoffed, getting to his feet and rubbing at the grass stains on his jeans.

“I apologise, that was inconsiderate” Hannibal joined him in standing, “I did not mean it to come out like that.”

“It's fine,” Will lied, feeling tendrils of agitation squirming behind his eyes. He pinched the bridge of his nose and silently reminded himself that he had *chosen* to return. “I um, I need to get some more supplies from the van.”

“I'll accompany you.”

“No, Matthew is more than capable of *babysitting* me, Hannibal.” Will had turned towards the house, but glanced over his shoulder to see how badly he had angered his keeper. Hannibal merely lifted a shoulder in a one sided shrug, mask firmly in place and revealing nothing, and nodded for Will to be on his way.

~

Winston joined them in their task, pattering cautiously at Will's side within the tunnel and then circling them joyously when they emerged in an expanse of land that the dog had yet to explore. The grass, where it had not been trampled by feet and tires, had grown so tall that only Winston's tail could be seen wagging happily above the green tips. Will kept half an eye on him as he retrieved the ram pump from the van, not willing to lose him a second time. He set the heavy metal piping to the ground and looked back up past the treetops, to the house sitting proudly atop the hill, with a sigh.

“What's wrong?” Matthew asked, rounding the van with the keys in hand.

“How do you see me?” Will asked him as he locked the back doors.

“Uh, with my eyes,” Matthew's grin faltered when he turned to see the very serious expression on Will's face. “What do you mean?”

“Well, what am I, when I'm there,” he jerked his head towards the distant structure they called home.

“Oh, uh, you're Hannibal's, I guess.”

Will let out an exasperated grunt, “Hannibal's *what*?”

When Matthew only furrowed his brow in reply Will continued.

“Am I still a prisoner here?” It came out smaller, sadder, than he would have liked and Matthew's eyes dropped to the floor as he searched for an answer.

“We all are,” He said, eventually. “He wouldn't let any of us leave now that we know the ins and outs of the house.”

Will crossed the clearing to where the truck was parked and climbed onto the flatbed to haul the second poly tank down. When it caught on a spare metal beam he felt his irritation increase a few notches and kicked it with enough force to dent the side and send it rolling from the truck and onto the ground below.

“Hey, if it makes you feel any better, you're his *favourite* prisoner.”

Will huffed in reply and dropped down from the truck, feeling a dull, residual strain in his ankle.

“No, I'm serious,” Matthew was bending to right the tank as he spoke, “I've been with Hannibal since this started, I was just a kid, and I've never seen him so-”

“So?” Will prompted, when Matthew trailed off and peered up at the ever-looming house.

“Well, so *lovesick*,” he snorted a laugh once the words had been spoken, so unfitting of his leader yet so incredibly true.

Will felt his chest flutter but had no time to reply before a feral snarl interrupted his train of thought from a nearby gathering of bushes.

“Winston!” He called, flagging the dog down and frowning when he didn't immediately return to his side.

The bushes rustled then, in a way that could not be blamed on a breeze nor an animal small enough to be harmless, and Winston's growling turned to full-fledged barking. The two men started to close the space to stand wearily at the dog's side, Will with a knife pulled from his belt and Matthew with a pistol drawn, but before they could reach him the bushes parted and a young woman with dark and distinctly Korean features emerged, submarine gun raised in their direction. Her sleek black hair was pulled taut from her face with a bandana, and she wore a bulletproof vest above her t shirt, the letters 'FBI' in faded print across the front. Behind her, several similarly attired people scattered off into the trees and Matthew looked as though he would have been ready to go after them if the barrel hadn't been aimed between his eyes.

“Winston,” Will hissed, tip of his knife pointed uselessly at the intruder.

Never the guard dog, the mutt had taken a liking to the woman and sniffed at her tactical boots curiously.

“Relax, I'm not about to open fire on a dog,” the woman said, with an air of bravery that suggested she had been in similar situations before.

She tilted the gun to the ground to suggest they drop their weapons and Will let the knife slip from his hand, fully aware of who had the upper hand.

“You too,” she nodded to Matthew who merely grinned at her, eyes wrinkling at the corners.

“I don't know about that. If I drop my gun, then what's to stop you from shooting us both?” He asked, waving his own pistol from Will to himself.

“I just want to question you,” she stated firmly, eyes narrowing at the blasé use of the weapon.

“About what?” Will asked, stepping up beside Matthew with his hands raised in an attempt to placate the woman and Matthew both.

“Will, go back to the house,” Matthew murmured to him, “Hannibal wouldn't like-”

“No, stay where you are.” The woman interrupted, gun trained on Matthew now that he was the only one of them that was armed. “And I'm here to find out if you know anything about a couple of my people going missing a few months back.”

“Nope, we don't know anything about that so-”

“So then I'll do you no harm if you lower your firearm.”

Matthew huffed a laugh and shrugged, bending to place the gun down at his feet. Only when the handle was barely an inch from the grass, he tilted the barrel upwards and pulled the trigger, watching the woman stumble then fall back into the overgrowth.

Will had started at the noise, as had Winston who had darted from the woman to cower behind his legs.

“Shit, did you kill her?” He asked, a sick feeling setting heavy in his gut to be an accomplice to something so unpalatable.

“No,” Matthew chuckled, straightening and loping towards where the woman lay, arms and legs tangled in the bushes “this is meant for you, it's a short-range tranquilliser gun.”

“Charming,” Will muttered, feeling more relieved than anything.

“Help me get her to the basement, we'll need to find out where the others went.”

Will swallowed down his objections, doing his best to adopt the excitement Matthew was radiating, and helped him bundle up the pliant body of the woman between them.

~

Will distanced himself from the proceedings after that, not willing to be a direct part of interrogating and butchering the woman, while still knowing he could not absolve himself from the guilt the entire situation stirred up within him.

He spent the rest of the day in the garden, distracted from his work on the water tower and doing his best to ignore the heap of bloodied clothing that Dolarhyde left to soak in a bucket by the front door. When the sky began to dim, he herded Winston inside, making sure he was comfortable in his old room, before climbing the stairs to join Hannibal. He hoped, perhaps selfishly, that the new captive had caused him to forget the disagreement they'd had that morning. Hannibal was sat at the desk, charcoal in hand, in nothing but his gossamer dressing gown. His hair was damp, no doubt because he had washed the woman's blood from it only moments ago. Will approached him quietly, knowing that the man was already fully aware of his presence beside him. He tilted his head to study the picture.

“Is that me?”

“Yes,” Hannibal answered quietly, hand still creating sweeping black lines across the paper, “as Anubis.”

Will couldn't help but smile down at the replica of himself, familiar curls poking out from under a striped nemes headdress.

“I thought Anubis was a dog,” Will admitted.

“A black coated wolf,” Hannibal corrected, stopping to sharpen the tip of his pencil with a scalpel in three steady strokes “though an extremely rare depiction of him in human form was found in the tomb of Ramesses the second.”

Will's eyebrows lofted slightly, forever amazed at the amount of knowledge Hannibal seemed to have locked away in his memory palace. He couldn't help a small breathy laugh when his eyes drifted to the bottom corner of the page.

“Is that Winston?” He asked, finger hovering above the image as not to smudge the lines.

Hannibal hummed, “not quite a golden jackal, but a fitting companion for this piece.” He stood then, clearly finished, and handed the drawing to Will.

“It's for you,” he explained, nodding for Will to take it from him. He did so, fingers at the edges where the paper was still white. “Place it wherever you would like, I would normally set it with a fixative but-”

“Thank you,” Will offered him a smile and placed it safely back down on the desk so that he could press a small kiss to his keeper's lips.

They climbed into the bed together where Will folded himself up in Hannibal's arms and fell swiftly to sleep, the events of the day quickly forgotten in unconsciousness.

Chapter 29

Will rose before the sun, his chest tight with deferred guilt. His keeper was sleeping soundly beside him, but the warmth of his body offered no relief from his heavy conscience and so Will slipped from beneath the sheets and dressed in silence. He paused at the desk, allowing his fingers to hover over Hannibal's drawing, before leaving to seek Winston out. He stopped abruptly at the foot of the stairs, noticing his companion ahead of him, snuffling at the crack beneath the basement door, a low whine building in his throat.

“Winston,” He hissed, unwilling to wake anyone yet equally unwilling to allow his dog to burden him further with contrition.

The dog's ears perked for a moment, but he refused to move, kneading his paws into the hard wood floor. Apparently, his canine integrity had not been tampered with in the same way as his master's. With a sigh Will approached him, feeling increasingly nauseas with each step.

“I know,” he muttered, crouching and gathering the dog's soft, speckled head in his hands, “You liked her.” Winston whimpered in response. “I kind of liked her too.”

Whether from her reluctance to hurt the dog, or some residual loyalty from his brief time spent teaching at the FBI academy; in another life, Will thought, they might have been friends.

A muffled, metallic sound drew Will's attention then, and had Winston whining anew. If not for the dog's reaction, Will might have convinced himself that he'd imagined it. He stood and pressed his ear to the door, feeling his breath catch in his throat when the scrape of chains became more distinct. He didn't have to try the handle to know that the door was locked, and so he rapped his knuckles quietly against it instead, the state of the woman confirmed when the rattling came to a sudden stop.

“Are you waiting for her too?” The voice was wavering and discordant and caused Will to jolt back from the door.

Katherine emerged from the shadows, head titled and crooked teeth displayed in a facsimile of a smile. She was twiddling an icepick between pale fingers. Winston's whining became growling and his hackles rose as he turned to snarl in her direction.

“Shh, bad dog!” She whispered, waving her instrument at him like a wand, “I can calm him, you know,” she said to Will.

Winston's lip curled upwards and his tail began to lash back and forth. It was a simple matter for Will to snatch the pick and point it back in Katherine's direction. She was constantly whimsical, even when threatening to lobotomise, and so her grip was relaxed.

“If you ever touch him, I'll convince Hannibal to eat you next,” it was only as he said the words that he realised to depth of truth behind them. He was absolutely in a position to ask that of Hannibal and have his wish fulfilled. Small victories, he supposed.

Katherine made a sound not unlike a child scolded and slunk off back into the shadows, leaving Will to contemplate the morning's revelations.

He pressed his back to the door sliding demoralized to the floor, Winston looking mournful beside him, and came to the sudden realisation that allowing the woman to die would be a step too far. He'd *seen* her, and hypocritical as it was, couldn't stand by a do nothing. A tiny, twisting, awful part of him wished that she had already succumbed to her injuries, it would have made his descent into full-blown Stockholm syndrome a little easier. Nothing he could say would change Hannibal at his core, but perhaps he could sway his decision just this once. He quashed the small flutter of hope he felt, lest he be rejected and broken by it. After a moment, when the sound from below did not resume, Will lead Winston back to his little room and shut him away with an apologetic pat to the head; it wouldn't help matters to let him scratch up Hannibal's decorative architrave.

Hannibal was awake when Will returned to the bedroom, and he wondered if he had been feigning sleep all along. He had a book propped open on his lap and didn't look up to where Will hovered in the doorway. Taking a steadying breath, Will felt it best to dive straight into it.

“Why is she still alive?”

Hannibal's brow twitched minutely, and he took his time to slide the book closed and place it on the bedside table. When he did finally meet Will's eye, he appeared forthright and frustratingly approachable. Everything about the situation was matter-of-fact to him.

“Our guest is very uncooperative, admirably loyal it would seem. Matthew mentioned there were others with her, we need to find out where they are and plan how best to deal with them.”

“Another dinner party?” Will muttered, looking down at his socked feet.

“Nothing so wasteful,” Hannibal assured, leaning back comfortably against the headboard, “there's no need now that I have you to keep the generators in peak condition.”

With a sigh Will entered the room, approaching the desk to pore over his own charcoal depiction. He flicked on the nearby lamp and allowed himself to absorb the copious amount of care that had gone into the piece. Anyone who spent their time perfecting his likeliness to that degree had to be willing to acquiesce with enough persuasion.

“Why didn't you just *inject* her?” Will asked, thinking back to the sting of a needle closely followed by a sudden proclivity for telling the truth.

“Ah, a method that requires some speech in order to work. I'm sure her *thoughts* were very honest, but her lips remained sealed.”

“I'd like to try,” Will said, running a finger along the edge of the drawing and appraising the black smudge on his fingertip.

There was a long moment of silence, followed by a gentle strain of mattress springs as Hannibal extracted himself from the bed.

“Try what? Your hand at torture?” He was closer that Will had expected and he silently castigated himself for startling.

When arms wrapped around his waist Will leaned back against the strong, naked body behind him, a natural reaction now, and felt Hannibal's chin come rest on his shoulder.

“Torture isn't working,” he reasoned, stroking the hands that were responsible for it.

“You think a touch of empathy is in order?”

Will nodded, relieved by the inflection of his words, he was considering it.

“She has to die, Will.”

“She will,” he lied, hoping that deceit wasn't on the list of things Hannibal's olfactory sense could detect.

“Then may I ask what exactly you hope to get out of this?”

Will allowed himself to be turned to face his keeper, so that he was bracketed against the desk. He braced himself and looked into his eyes. Hannibal seemed intrigued and suspicious in equal measures.

“I can't live with it, Hannibal. The suffering, it's eating away at me.” Will ducked beneath Hannibal's arm, well aware that he had been *allowed* to withdraw, and paced to the other side of the room. “It's a different world now, people kill to survive, but *this...”* He trailed off, hoping a sweeping motion could encompass all that was wrong with the situation. Hannibal hadn't turned to look, he stood unnaturally still, hands still pressed to the desk surface, like a mourning sculpture.

“You once called it beautiful.”

Damn the man for sounding *dejected*. Will felt a slither of guilt; Mason's demise had been a pivotal moment between them and it hadn't just been death for the sake of death, he hadn't meant to belittle it.

“*That* is not the same as *this*, Hannibal.” He felt his voice soften, “That was- it *was* beautiful, but this is morbid and cruel and-”

“I am cruel, Will.” The older man cut him off.

Will swallowed the lump in his throat.

“Yes, you are cruel,” he agreed, coming to press his forehead to the man's back to let him know it had not been an insult. He embraced him that way, so that their previous roles were reversed and realised that he had never felt more in control that he did in that moment.

“But you also care, vehemently, remember?”

Hannibal didn't reply.

“I'll talk to her, get the answers we need and then the suffering stops.”

It sounded like an order, and for a moment Will expected his keeper to turn and remind him of his position. When he merely nodded, Will felt vile. This was a level of trust he had never expected to have been extended to him, and he was about to betray it.

Chapter 30

Facing her was more difficult than he had expected.

The fluorescent lights flickered to life, accompanied by the familiar scrape of chains against the tiled floor, but Will remained in the doorway, unprepared to descend the steps and witness what Hannibal had done. The house behind him was calm. He wanted to step back into the orange glow of the hall and allow it to envelop him, away from the white glare before him and everything it contained, but the weight of the canteen in his hand corporealized his conscience and pulled him down. The copper tang in the air prepared Will for the blood, settling like a macabre motif along the grout, but it was the resentment harboured behind red rimmed eyes that caused Will to falter when he saw her. Quite suddenly, the notion that his empathy could be of any help was unfathomable. In the present picture, he was the monster. He let his eyes drop to the floor, and approached her like he would a stray, kneeling in the mess a few feet away from her.

“I brought you water,” he said, well aware that she was intelligent enough to take it.

He looked up briefly as he slid the canteen her way, watching her eyes narrow and knowing instantly what she was thinking; they had already drugged her by force, and when they were ready to kill her they would be direct about it. Still, she waited for his hands to retract before jolting forward with what must have been every ounce of her remaining strength to bring the cool, wet rim to her lips.

While she was occupied, Will perused her injuries. It wasn't quite as awful as he had imaged; more of a raw, intricate scarification than the bloody gouges he had been expecting. Every one of Hannibal's vicious creations seemed esoteric now, and Will could only find fault in himself for his ability to unravel the intent behind them. Instead of deep gashes, her arms and legs were peppered with slender, curling cuts that served to prolong her life while appealing to Hannibal's penchant for aesthetics. Stems and petals of dried, beaded blood stretching along the expanse of her arms.

She didn't finish the water, stopping to catch her breath with the canteen clutched to her chest. Her black hair hung like a curtain between them, keeping her face concealed while she composed herself. There was something feline in the way her back arched, spine protruding just enough to confirm that food was scarce wherever she had come from. She wore only her underwear, but Will knew Hannibal well enough to know that her sodden clothes had been cut away to reveal what he had adopted as his newest canvas, and that was all. They stayed that way for a time, while Will did his best to discern what he could from her silence. It hardly took an empathy disorder to recognize the loyalty and strength needed to stay silent through Hannibal's ministrations, or the depth of her survival instinct, though everyone who had made it this far was a survivor in their own right.

When Will's knees began to ache, he lowered himself to sit and simply continued to observe. He could see the woman's shoulders tensing with each passing second until eventually the underlying curiosity he had suspected compelled her to break the silence.

“You're the dog guy, right?” She looked up as she spoke, some of the earlier resentment replaced with a wary interest.

Will felt a wavering smile creep unbidden to his face.

“Uh, yeah, I'm the dog guy,” he said with an awkward nod, feeling a little uncomfortable now that he was the one being scrutinised, “Will.” He supplied.

The woman seemed to take a moment to digest her current situation, shifting to face him and wincing with the new position. Will's eyes darted to her wrists where the skin had become exposed with her struggle and rubbed at his own without thinking. He hadn't damaged himself so badly but then again, he'd been far more cooperative. When his time suspended from the butcher’s hook had been over, he wasn't left chained to the wall like this woman had been.

“Beverly.”

Her voice snapped him from his morbid reverie, and it took a long moment to realise she had given him her name. She had been watching the absent stroking of his wrists. Will tucked his hands up into the oversized sleeves of the shirt he had borrowed from Hannibal and inclined his head in a silent sort of greeting.

“Thanks,” he murmured, the sterile silence of the room calling for quiet voices.

“For my name?”

Will nodded, “and for not shooting my dog.”

Beverly licked her cracked lips and then, as if only just remembering its existence, raised the canteen to them and took another long drink of water. Her knuckles had grown white from gripping the container so tightly.

“Kinda wish I'd shot you though,” she replied, with no small amount of disdain.

“That's fair,” Will had to admit.

He looked towards the large, steel cabinet blocking the exit, remembering a time when he had been so unknowingly close to his own escape. Beverly drank the last of the water and let the canteen fall and clatter against the hard tile before pulling her knees up to her chest, hissing with the pain of it. Will watched several of the incisions start to bleed anew and wondered if he should offer some form of pain relief or get straight to the point. He decided that opting for the latter may be premature, if only it were so simple as allowing her to gallivant off into the sun.

“I want to help you.”

His words hung between them in the silence that followed.

Beverly refused to reply. Will supposed it was only natural that she think he was trying to manipulate her. He left her, to heat some water over the stove and retrieve an apple from the

garden. It was early but the day promised to be as scalding as the one before, and so the crops were being tended to before the weather became unbearable. Hannibal was among the group harvesting snap beans, though he was directing more than actually taking part.

With his keeper distracted, Will left the water boiling and made a detour to the bedroom, clicking the door quietly shut behind him. The armoire seemed more prominent than usual, taunting Will with its contents. He knew Hannibal's medical bag lay within, but he had never dared to sift through the man's belongings before. He reached toward the polished, brass handle but paused, letting his hand drop to his side. This part at least should have been simple, his own borrowed clothing lay folded on a shelf within it; plain shirts and slacks that Hannibal had long grown bored of and t-shirts and jeans from Matthew's wardrobe, but he felt a creeping paranoia that Hannibal could sense his intent.

He crossed the room to lean across the harpsichord and peer through the boards at the window. If he squinted, he could just about distinguish Hannibal's inappropriately coiffed hair among his more dishevelled followers. With a new resolve, Will returned to the armoire and pulled it open to reveal the offending item. Sat beneath the hems of a dozen garish suit jackets was the black leather doctor's bag.

He explored the contents with shaky hands until he happened upon a glass vile with a label that he recognised from the aftermath of Mason's attack. It clinked against the barrel of the syringe as he fiddled to draw what he hoped wasn't a fatal dosage. With the little bottle back in its place, Will stopped to look at the sharp point of the needle. For a brief and bizarre moment he recalled the afternoon that his father returned home early and found him playing with his shaving kit. Only this time being caught would most definitely result in graver consequences than a boxed ear.

Will flicked the syringe and watched the tiny pockets of air gather at the top. He would wait until he was back in the basement to expel them, certain that if anyone could detect a spritz of Toradol, it would be Hannibal.

Beverley eyed him warily when he returned, juggling everything in his arms, and she tensed when her eyes fell to the needle gripped tightly between two fingers.

“It's to kill the pain,” Will explained, placing the bowl of cooling water down first, “you don't have to take it if you don't believe me.”

He hoped she would, her agony was raw and too close to the surface for Will to shut out. He let some of the amber liquid spurt from the tip before handing it over to Beverly, an action that seemed to throw her more than anything he had done up until that point. They both looked pointedly at the sharp, metal tip as Will silently beseeched her not to use his benevolence against him.

After a moment she held it up to the light, squinting.

“What is it?”

“...Toradol,” Will answered hesitantly, turning to search for a clean strip of cloth. He placed the apple alone at the centre of a table that was more commonly reserved for torture

paraphernalia.

“Trying to dose me up enough that I'll spill my secrets?”

Will turned to tilt his head at her, he was anxious and hoped it didn't show, feeling his shoulder's hunch as he washed his hands in the large, steel sink off to the side.

“Huh, you didn't realise you were OD-ing me,” she surmised, “good thing i'm medically trained.”

At first Will thought she had relaxed enough to let that fact slip, but quickly deducted that she was hinting at her living value. She may have been strong, but she was equally scared. Will returned with the cloth in time to see her plunge two thirds of the medication into her veins.

“I suppose you're gonna want this back now?” She asked, holding the syringe up to Will's eyelevel, attempting to sound nonchalant.

Will could imagine that the woman was not easily disturbed, but there was only so much pain and sleep deprivation one person could endure before their strength of mind started to falter, he could attest to that. He nodded, sitting across from her and offering the bowl of water and a piece cloth in exchange, feeling immensely grateful when the syringe rolled his way. He sheathed it in its slender, plastic tip and dropped it into his pocket.

“I'm surprised Doctor Fancy-Pants didn't correct you,” she muttered, ringing the cloth and bringing it first to her face to rid it of day old sweat and dried tears. She was shaking, whether from the fear, pain or anger Will could not decipher.

“He enlightened you then.”

Will cleared his throat when his words came out fond, but Beverly was too emerged in the act of cleaning her wounds to take note of his intonation.

“He certainly knows how to wield a scalpel,” she said, too quietly, while pressing the cloth to a slit that had cut a little deeper than the others. She tensed but it seemed to be pre-emptive.

“Huh, this stuff really works,” she sighed, rolling out her neck, “If I had taken that whole dose you could have cut my leg off without me noticing.

“I wouldn't joke about that here,” Will answered, realising belatedly that it had sounded like a threat.

Beverley twisted the cloth above the bowl. Will watched the tainted water fall, like drops of rosé disturbing the still surface below.

“I thought he was in control,” Beverly continued as if she hadn't heard Will at all, “but I guess not. He doesn't know you're doing this does he?”

Despite his own intentions, Will felt himself bristle. She wasn't in the position to pry, or to question Hannibal's standing. He shook that last thought from his head, it was strange to feel defensive on his keeper's behalf, but Beverly seemed to mistake it for an answer for she did

not push further. When she was done cleaning herself, to the best of her ability, Will exchanged the bowl for the apple in the same way he had the syringe. She devoured it, core and all, and leant back against the red spattered wall with her eyes closed. Will watched her for a while, convinced she had fallen unconscious, but eventually she cleared her throat and spoke without looking at him.

“I thought there would be more questions.”

“Would you like there to be more questions?”

He wondered when he had started to sound so much like Hannibal. Answering a query with a question of his own. He decided to correct himself; “I don't have many.”

“Are you supposed to be the good cop then?” she asked and, to Will's surprise, actually laughed.

Will felt the corners of his lips tug up despite himself.

“No,” it was easier to speak with her like this, without the intensity of her intelligent eyes. “Not anymore.”

One brown iris appeared, only for a moment.

“Huh, I didn't peg you for law enforcement.”

Will nodded and when it was clear he wouldn't delve any further, Beverly let her eye slip closed again.

“It won't work you know,” she wrapped her slender arms around her legs, shivering a little.

“Hmm?”

“Telling me about yourself, it's not gonna make me open up. Not that I don't appreciate the change in tactic.”

“It might,” Will argued, but didn't push her. Instead he got to his feet and approached the cabinet that stood so precariously between her captivity and her freedom.

Her FBI vest was tucked away on the second shelf, Will wanted to give it back to her, to force the cabinet aside and send her on her way. He reached around it, for a neatly rolled fleece blanket instead.

When Hannibal came to collect him, he merely raised a brow at the swaddled captive, and offered a hand to help Will to his feet. It lessened the strain on his ankle, exasperated by his position on the hard floor, and Will felt his chest tighten with guilt once more for leaving Beverly without so much as a bedroll.

“I came to tell you that you'd spent more than enough of your time down here for one day,” Hannibal said, still holding Will's hand, “but I suppose our guest has already made that clear. She's sleeping?”

Beverly's chest rose slowly beneath the blanket, head lolling to the side where she sat.

Will nodded, convincing himself that it wasn't lying if he didn't speak.

Chapter 31

“Did your empathetic abilities help you to uncover anything about our guest?” Hannibal asked, standing rather ineffectually at the base of Will's makeshift scaffolding.

“I wish you wouldn't call her that,” Will muttered, as he scaled his way awkwardly up towards what would soon be a fully functional water tower.

“What would you have me call her?” Hannibal asked, nonchalant yet always scheming. He had the aura of a smile about him that both irritated and drew Will in.

“Captive,” Will called down to him, taking a moment to gather himself upon reaching the platform, “- prisoner, dinner, *Beverly*.”

“Ah,” came the pleased response, and though Will could not see Hannibal where he lounged uselessly in the shade, he knew he would be looking vaguely smug. “Did she have anything else to say?”

Will shifted his supplies noisily towards the toe-board, mainly to give the allusion of being more absorbed by his work than he actually was.

“That she wished she'd shot me when she had the chance,” Will said, peering over the metal frame to see only the absurdly polished tips of his keeper's shoes.

“That's fair,” the shoes replied.

“That's what I said.”

It had frustrated Will to leave her there, feigning sleep, but Hannibal loathed to be kept out of the loop and that could be used to his advantage. He took a moment to gather himself, placing a hand to sun-hot polypropylene, before pushing the tank to rest against the railing between himself and the ladder.

“She's medically trained, you know.”

“Oh?”

It was a long shot, longer than a long shot, but if she appeared useful she might be kept around.

“Yeah, and I'm willing to bet that FBI equipment belonged to her before, I doubt those things are easy to get your hands on, even now.”

Will stepped away from the railing, feeling a little light-headed in the sun. It was quiet for a moment, and he began to twist a length of rubber piping between his hands.

“Did you learn all of that before or after you stole from my medical bag?”

Oh God.

A bird flew overhead. Will stumbled into the shingles at his back.

Silence.

Will did not feel any particular urge to break it. It stretched on for a time, the roof leaving imprints in his skin through his shirt. Any of his prior presumptions regarding Hannibal's obsession and his subsequent safety left him in an instant when the tip tap of brogues on steel rungs sounded and the scaffolding lowed beneath him.

His captor rose like Cthulhu, eyes just as red but more terrifying for his serenity; head tilted in a way that dared Will to deny his deceit.

Will pushed himself further onto the gentle slant of the roof.

Hannibal took a step towards him.

“How did you know?” It was the worst, and only, thing he could have said.

Despite his captor having a drop at his back, it was clear to both men that Will was most vulnerable.

Hannibal crossed the space between them too quickly, gripping Will's throat before he had a chance to shuffle further from him. He bent at the waist, grip tightening, and ran his nose along his jawline.

He inhaled. An answer to Will's question.

Overwhelmed for a moment by uncertainty and the speed of his heartbeat, Will was unsure how to react. He thought of begging, lying, crying out and clawing, but in the end he decided against regressing to the frightened creature he had been when Hannibal first claimed him and settled for staring up at him, eyes bright with defiance and fists clenched at his sides.

Hannibal's breath caught, barely detectable if not for the insignificance of anything other than their own existence, but enough for Will to know that his captor was thrilled. It wasn't approval in any traditional sense of the word. There was an element of respect, but Will had crawled inside too many murderous minds to not recognise the appeal of a victim that presented a challenge.

“This can't go unpunished, Will.” Hannibal sighed, “Wait for me in my room.”

“And if I refu-” Will choked on the end of his sentence as the hand at his throat silenced him.

“Now.”

When released, Will refused to scurry away like a reprimanded child. It took every fibre of control he had, but he lowered himself to the ground with as much dignity as was possible and walked slowly to the house. It was only when he entered, and collided with Matthew, that he realised he was trembling.

“I did something wrong.” He supplied, without being prompted.

Matt's answering expression did nothing to ease the clawing fear that was accelerating with every step towards the stairs. He blocked Will's path but they both knew that nobody other than Will held any sway over their leader.

“Shit, Will I-”

“I took medicine, I gave it to her,” He jerked his chin towards the basement door.

“*Why?*” Matt hissed.

“I-”

A wet nose found its way into Will's palm and his panic increased, a vivid image of a cockerel head scorched the back of Will's eyes, a plume of red feathers and frayed tendons.

“He wouldn't,” Will whispered, holding Winston's soft head between his hands, though it sounded more like a question than a statement.

“He wouldn't.” Matt echoed, then; “He *won't*, I need to get something from the truck and I don't feel safe without this mutt watching my back.”

He hooked a finger under the dog's collar and seemed to think about dragging Will away too before deciding he valued his own life too dearly.

“Will you be alright?”

Will looked at him incredulously and Matt ducked his head and made a reluctant retreat.

“He wouldn't kill you,” He offered lamely before leaving, as if death was the worst Hannibal had to offer.

With the stairs before him and the basement to his left, Will chose the only option that made any sense and turned right, making his way to the little, dark room that had housed the torment of his earliest days under Hannibal's roof.

Hannibal entered his house with all the outward ease of a man whose mind had never housed a nefarious thought. Loose shoulders, unfurled hands and an uncharacteristic gentleness to the set of his lips and jaw. The only inclination of his frenetic thoughts, and indeed a sign that only Will would have noticed, was the blankness behind his eyes. A lack of certainty inhibited him from projecting any feigned mindset to that extent.

His palace was crumbling; the once-polished wooden floors reduced to splinters, great murals obscured, as if viewed through frosted glass. The one room that stood, solid and immovable, was that which housed Will; cold eyes and jittery speech, and the hushed sound of dull lead

against paper. And even that was blocked from him, by broken rafters and dangling meat hooks that weren't where they ought to be.

His captive had betrayed him, and in doing so ripped and rent the halls of Hannibal's mind. Years of creating his person suit, tending to his monster's growth, and now all of it was scattered and Will was to blame.

He climbed the stairs, trying to picture a multitude of outcomes and feeling his fury rise further with his inability to predict Will's reaction. Would he run from a gutting, lean into it, *thank him* for finally releasing him? His monster reared its head at the thought, grinning yet trembling to imagine a world without Will in it. He needed to *hurt* him, so seriously that he would never again think to act against his keeper, but then the idea that Will might withdraw, cease to speak again, crushed the air from Hannibal's lungs and he had to stop to right himself. A strange fear had gripped him, an emotion that he had long ago refused to acknowledge, and with thoughts of maiming and fucking and asphyxiation in mind he entered his room to find it empty.

He looked for the dog, disgusted by his own panic, if it were gone, then so was Will.

He had not expected to find him in its place.

“I've been lying to myself,” Will whispered, but somehow the severity of the words had them ringing clear and crisp between them.

Hannibal hesitated at the door, the curled form on the floor starkly reminiscent of the time that he had kept him that way, broken him and tried to shape him into something else. It appeared he had failed, and Will remained shattered by his hand.

“At some point I started to convince myself that I was here in the same way as Matt and Peter and Freddie, but I'm not.” He let his face fall against the wall with a hollow thump, and exhaled shakily before continuing; “I didn't come here on my own, you did this to me.” He sounded tired, so much so that Hannibal felt something startlingly close to guilt to have been the cause of it.

Will lifted his hands to his face in a sort of Macbethian horror.

“What have you done to me?” He asked, with such desperation that Hannibal found himself closing the space between them to comfort, not to cull.

He knelt until his lips were hovering over Will's ear.

“I can feed the caterpillar, I can whisper through the chrysalis, but what hatches follows its own nature and is beyond me.”

“*Don't*”, Will hissed, inching away from him, and the venom lacing the word had Hannibal reconsidering which one of them was the betrayer. At a loss for the right thing to do or say he tried to reclaim his standing as captor.

“Will, I asked you to wait for me in my room, we need to deal with what you've done.” He regretted it immediately, when Will huffed a derisive laugh and shrugged.

“*Deal* with it here, this is where I belong.”

“*Will*.”

“*Hannibal*.”

His index finger twitched, as close as his hands had ever come to clenched fists without his own conscious approval. He considered dragging him by his curls, drugging him and laying him out beneath the sheets of their bed, or even aiming a subtle threat at the dog. He did none of these things, he resorted to something petty and regressive instead.

“I won't waste electricity on you if you continue to act this way,” the words tasted bitter even as he said them, but he got to his feet and allowed Will to see his hand, hovering just behind the door frame over the light switch.

Will glared at him then, the blue of his eyes viciously cold.

“Fear of the dark is really fear of the unknown. I'm too well acquainted with the monsters of this house to be afraid.”

“It could be argued that you are one of them,” Hannibal replied, tilting his head.

Will held his gaze for a long time, and when he looked away it was done so in way that echoed of disdain rather than submission.

“If that will be all,” he muttered from the floor.

Even as Hannibal flicked the switch, and bolted the door shut, he could not escape the fact that he no longer held the upper hand. Physical strength meant nothing now. The game was in self-control, and somehow, Will was winning.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Has he asked for me?”

In any other circumstance Hannibal would not risk sounding so weak, but Matthew knew he stood to lose his life if the others were regaled with talk of his pining. The younger man shook his head, standing uncertainly at the bedroom door, with Winston nudging his thigh beside him. “For the light then?”

“No, nothing.”

“Nothing? Stubborn boy.” Hannibal muttered, sitting at his harpsichord, having just played the first composition he'd shown Will.

“Well, Winston but-”

“The dog stays with me.” Hannibal whistled sharply and Winston trotted dolefully to his side, whining as he settled at his feet. “Thank you, Matthew, see that he is well fed but do not linger.”

The door clicked shut and Hannibal's eyes fell to the mess of fur on the floor. Tentatively he reached out to run a hand along it's soft, clean coat. It could be considered unnecessarily selfish, to keep Will's dog away from him, but it was the closest thing to having the man himself and Will had been the one to betray him after all. He was hardly in the mood for leniency.

It had been three days since Will had imprisoned himself, and Hannibal was impressed and enraged in equal measures. At first he had considered purging his anger in the basement, ripping the cause for all this into pieces, but as Will had acted on her behalf it would probably have made matters even more difficult to resolve. He'd done his best to act aloof, but when Francis and Cordell had started lurking with a predatory aura about them he'd assumed his shift in control had been noticed. He'd sent them promptly on a excursion and had shut himself away in his room with only Matthew and Peter to tend to him. It could be argued that he was hoarding Will's friends as well, but if anyone had noticed they did not mention it within his earshot.

Even with the size of his room he was starting to experience the skin-crawling itch of cabin fever. He spent the time reconstructing his mind palace and, once complete, sprawling in the room dedicated to Will, watching him glisten shirtless under a sweltering sun and listening to his own name, spoken for the first time, on repeat.

Finally, his need to exercise his mind and body took over and he set out to the garden, silently miserable in the knowledge that Will had outdone him in this too.

Winston followed, but stopped and sat firmly by the door that housed his master as they passed it.

“Insufferable animal,” Hannibal muttered, but left him to his own devices.

The gardeners did not look up as he passed, aware that he would not appreciate their curiosity. His people were on edge, startled by his presence. Only Matthew approached him and did so sparingly and with great caution.

“I could finish the water tower, if you want, I mean”, he had offered on the first day.

Hannibal had wanted to strangle him, for no discernible reason, but had replied with a sharp shake of his head instead. Functional plumbing could wait and so, it seemed, could Will.

~

Will had developed a certain sort of resilience in the time he'd spent with Hannibal. While swallowed in darkness it occurred to him that he'd often found himself lost in his keeper's mind. In the times that they'd found themselves tangled together in bed, his thoughts had been Hannibal's. He'd seen himself in all the glory that the older man bestowed upon him and now it seemed the effects were irreversible.

He was stronger now, harsher. Hannibal had broken him, but had put him back together in such a way that he could not be shattered a second time. When the silence became too much he tapped his knuckles against the wall to ground himself. When the dark turned to antlered shadows and his own rhythms to the click clack of hooves, he closed his eyes and emerged himself in the quiet of the stream. Matthew would bring his food and was easily persuaded to stay a while.

“Has he asked for me?” Will would inquire, between mouthfuls, and Matthew would sigh and shake his head, lips parting as if he had something to say, but always deciding against it.

It was not, by any means, a long-term solution, and less than five hours in Will felt a dull ache for the man who'd left him there. But the situation was always bound to descend into some form a mayhem. Cracked and disrupted though it was, Will still had a moral compass, and Hannibal's way of life did not accommodate it.

~

In the garden, Hannibal stood at the fence, looking out at nothing in particular. In his mind he heard the sound of metal cuffs clinking desperately against the chain link. He let his eyes slip closed, certain that remembering the simple beginnings of their relationship would bring him

some peace, but instead the image of Will sobbing silently at the looming barrier only brought him more discomfort.

He'd been mistaken in thinking that he'd missed the time he'd spent doting on and damaging Will. It had been intriguing, something to while away the stretching similarity of this new world, but in shaping Will he himself had been changed.

Now he yearned for an equal.

~

The light flickered on.

Will squinted, confused, waiting for his eyes to adjust and their new soreness to abate.

When they did, he drew his brows close in confusion. The door did not open, but instead the shuffle of cloth against it made it apparent that someone had slid to the floor just outside of his room.

When nothing happened he scooted across the small space and placed a hand against the door.

After a few seconds of silence, Hannibal spoke from the other side.

“What would you have done?”

Will's breath hitched, it felt as though it had been far longer than three days since he'd last heard the thick timbre and twist of Lithuanian that was Hannibal's voice. Now it overwhelmed him, and his hand flinched back from the barrier between them, as if it had scalded his palm. When he'd composed himself he answered.

“I would have tried to convince you to let her go.”

“And if I'd said no?”

Will sighed, aware that his answer would only widen the rift between them, but unwilling to pretend any longer.

“I would have done it anyway.”

He waited for darkness to consume him again, and when it failed to do so tensed in anticipation of the door tearing open but nothing happened, and when empty seconds turned to minutes Will convinced himself that Hannibal had left, in that impossibly silent way of his. He slid back to rest against the far wall and began to shut his eyes just in time to hear the one word reply to his admission.

“Good,” and for the first time since Hannibal had screamed his sister's name into the dark stretch of snow and fir trees, his voice broke.

“G-good?” Will stuttered, wondering if the dark had finally consumed his sanity after all.

The door slid open, and there stood Hannibal, smaller than Will remembered, softer, and more unsure than he'd ever seen him. His heart lurched and he got unsteadily to his feet and closed the distance between them, feeling long arms embrace him with a desperate strength that he could hardly believe he had gone so long without.

“Good?” He asked again, disbelieving.

His lips were sought out and he succumbed. He could ask questions later.

“Your unpredictability torments me,” Hannibal managed to say, voice deep and desperate. He let out a small, throaty laugh but it seemed anguished, “I have a taste for torment.”

Drawing back, Will trembled, not with fear but with a sort of distress to find himself so close to Hannibal while so far away from the privacy of their bedroom. He considered undressing there and then, and allowing Hannibal to tear the throats out of anyone who might come across them, but managed to withdraw from the building carnality between them long enough to tug his cannibal towards the stairs.

“You're as trapped as I am,” he huffed, forcing the other's jacket down his arms and tugging mercilessly at his shirt, mindless of the tearing of fabric and scattering of dress studs.

Hannibal fell, shirtless, across the width of the bed and the lunacy of the entire scene had Will's length pressing hard against his trousers. He pinned him to the bed with his eyes as he undressed himself, hands fumbling with nervous energy to find himself in such a sudden position of power.

A Scarlett haze had fallen over them both, a type of fever that neither wanted release from.

“Will,” Hannibal gasped, too breathless to make the word carry further than the tight gap between them as Will climbed, gloriously naked, on top of him.

“I need you to say it,” Will said, one hand keeping Hannibal where he lay, the other searching blindly in the nearest bedside drawer for a glass vile of lubricant.

Hannibal lurched up, so that their chests were pressed flush against one another, and found it for him. He wet his fingers, and reached around to stretch him, and Will's breath stuttered at the intrusion.

“Say it!” He hissed, freeing Hannibal’s cock before gripping his throat, tight enough to leave crescent bruises where the other's might see if he pressed too long. He raised a brow, rolling his hips once.

“I'm irrevocably trapped-” Hannibal choked on the last word, as Will released him and sank down onto his cock.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone, thank you for sticking with me up until this point! This is where I left off the first time around, so chapters from now on will be new and spaced probably about a week apart. I've got the chapter count set at 36 in total, but it may be longer depending on what happens when I'm actually writing them. Thanks for all of the new readers, and especially to all of those who read this already and came back the second time around!

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They had fucked roughly, and in the immediate aftermath both men found themselves recovering entwined with the other. The naked expanse of their skin displayed a litany of post-coital destruction; bite marks, sucked bruises and scratches still beading with blood. The bed had not fared much better – the sheets were sprawled in a heap of silk and satin on the floor. Wrecked and ruddy-cheeked, the men hardly needed them. Where their feverish skin met, it stuck, and neither wanted to be the one to peel away. For all that he had declared himself irrevocably trapped, Hannibal oozed satisfaction. After an orgasm that was shocking in its intensity, Will had plastered himself to the other's side with his head on Hannibal's chest. When he looked up at the man's face, his eyes held the quality of a preening cat. Will was not sure what his own expression conveyed, he was not even sure what he felt in that moment, but Hannibal seemed content with whatever he found there. As close to perfection as it had been, it was not the kind of sex that lead to the whispering of sweet nothings, and so Will sighed and reluctantly broke the silence.

"We need to talk about it," he groaned.

"No," Hannibal answered, quickly, but without any fervour.

Will raised a brow and started to pull away. Immediately, he found their positions switched; Hannibal draping himself over Will to keep him there.

"Alright," he acquiesced, searching Will's mouth out and pulling a lip lightly between his teeth. He released it and continued; "The compromise being your continued presence in my bed."

"*Our* bed," Will pushed, remaining supine beneath the other all while challenging Hannibal with sharp, blue eyes.

"Our bed," he agreed, sighing the words as though they were a prayer.

"The night that Mason took me," Will began, grimacing. He felt Hannibal tense above him but pushed on; "One of the creatures nearly killed me."

"Hmm, I shot it," Hannibal said, pressing their foreheads together.

"Later, in the car, I heard something. Something about migration."

The memory had resurfaced shortly after the excitement of Mason's execution had worn off. He knew from experience that the monsters flocked like birds and so it made sense that they might migrate too, if the need arose.

“Yes, in the early days we were relatively safe here.” Hannibal sighed, rolling off of Will to stare up at the ceiling as he spoke. “The cities had their sewers and more in the way of sustenance for the beasts. In recent years, driven to survive on smaller prey, the creatures have ventured further into the surrounding woodland. They normally pass through, but this time it seems they’re staying.”

“How do you know?” Will asked, though he had already accepted it as fact.

“Shortly after your excursion, I sent others to scavenge. There were signs of the demons all around.”

Will swallowed the lump in his throat.

“They know we’re here,” he surmised, voice laced with dread.

“It seems so,” Hannibal murmured.

He turned to his side, facing Will, and reached out to tuck a wayward curl behind his ear.

“I have the sneaking suspicion this is all leading to Beverly,” he said pointedly.

Will slipped closer, tracing an angry red scratch across Hannibal’s chest. He could feel the burn of a dozen identical marks across his own back.

“They have weapons and armour, FBI grade, that we could use.”

“And you believe they’d be willing to part with them?”

“I know they will,” he answered. “We’ll give them Beverly in return for guns, ammo and maybe even an armoured vehicle.”

Bringing Will’s searching hand to his lips, Hannibal pressed a gentle kiss to his palm and whispered;

“And if they won’t be bargained with?”

Will felt confident they would. Beverly was an asset to her community. He wanted to offer something more tangible to Hannibal though.

“They know where we are, and that we have one of theirs. We know there’s at least two of them, but almost definitely more. Whether or not we choose to make a trade, they’ll eventually come for her. It could be a bloodbath-”

Will paused, exasperated, when Hannibal’s eyes turned dark.

“*Or*,” he continued, “we could *not* risk one another’s lives. I don’t want to lose you, Hannibal.”

“Manipulative,” Hannibal murmured fondly, stretching languidly along the length of the bed until his joints popped. “But I’m willing to play along.”

-

“It’s been a while,” Beverly noted, when Will joined her later that afternoon.

She raised a brow at the bowl of soup he slid her way.

“You gonna get in trouble for this?” She asked, even as she pulled it closer and raised it to her lips.

“No,” Will answered, brow drawn, “why?”

Beverley offered him a one shouldered shrug. Will was glad to see that the cuts in her skin were healing well. Three days on and they weren’t that much worse than the scars Hannibal and Will had gifted each other the previous night.

“Only your leader’s been down here the last few days. He was talkative the first time, but since you and I spoke he’s only been offering me icy glares.” She chuckled uneasily. “Like I stole his favourite toy or something.”

Will ignored the insult in the words. She was perceptive, smart, strong, and medically trained to boot. Her people would be willing to part with a lot to get her back.

“We had a…disagreement,” he allowed, “but I think I have a way out for you now. I need you to be honest with me first, though.”

Beverly shook her head. Placing the empty bowl down with a loud clink.

“Not falling for it,” she said, bitterly.

Will sighed but he had expected suspicion. He crossed the room and collected the worn FBI vest from within the steel cabinets.

“This,” he said, taking a seat opposite her and holding it up, “is what we want in return.”

With narrowed eyes, Beverley seemed to assess him and the veracity of his words.

“Not just this,” Will amended, “at least guns and ammo too.”

This seemed to convince her, as she rolled her shoulders out and leant back against the wall.

“That’s a lot to ask for,” she said.

“You’re worth it,” Will replied.

“I bet you say that to *all* the hostages,” she quipped, with a tired smile.

Will chewed his lip. There were some things it was easier not to revisit, but he needed her to trust him if he was going to be able to trust the answers she gave him.

“*I’m* the only other hostage to make it out of this alive,” he said quietly.

“I figured as much,” she responded and then, to Will’s curious expression added, ‘the guy you were with tried to send you back when you found me. Said Hannibal wouldn’t like you being out there. That’s you leader, right? And then when you saw the marks the chains left on me. You rubbed your own wrists.”

Will huffed and nodded, impressed.

“You’re not *out of it* though,” She muttered, “not really.”

Not at all, Will thought. If anything, he was tied more tightly to the community, and the man who lead it, than he ever was when he was in chains.

“No, but you will be, when you’ve told me what I need to know.”

-

“Thirty five people,” Hannibal announced that evening, to Mathew, Hampson, Dolarhyde and Cordell.

Will was at his side, where they had gathered at the dining table, looking nervously down at a map Beverly had drawn out for him. Sensing his discomfort, Hannibal pressed the side of his leg against Will’s, unseen to the others who were preoccupied with the terrific number of people in the opposition. Beside the core group of people Will had interacted with since being taken - the five at the table, Peter Freddie, Katherine and Frederick – there were only a handful of others in the community; an older man in a wheelchair, who rarely left his room; a jittery man that kept to the mushroom farm at the edge of the property; and a blind woman that Will had begun to doubt really knew the full extent of the horrors she was a part of. The odds were not in their favour.

“Our hostage thinks that two in particular are likely to be scouting the area in search of a way to get to her,” Hannibal continued, turning to Mathew. “You’ve seen them briefly. A Jimmy and Brian. Keep an eye out for them and greet them by name if you see them, so that they’ll believe you when you tell them their friend is alive.”

Mathew leaned across the table, clearly excited by the turn of events.

“Should I bring them in when I see them?” He asked, with a lopsided grin.

“No,” Will said, before Hannibal could answer. “Just tell them we have her and that we want to talk to their leader, The Guru. We’ll all be with you when he turns up, so you don’t get taken or hurt.”

“Shucks, Will,” he purred, before cowering a little under Hannibal’s glare.

“Please pick three others to be on lookout with you until that time.” Hannibal added.

When the plan was set in motion, Will took Winston out to the coop to relay everything to Peter. The dog had stuck close to his side, with the exception of his time in the basement, but once he realised who they were going to see he circled Will in two large loops and then sped

off to get there first. The chickens were in a flurry by the time Will caught up. He found Peter crouched where they had once communicated in the mud, hands buried deep in Winston's fur.

"W-Will," he murmured, turning away to look at nothing so that he could continue to lather Winston with attention.

It had not escaped Will's notice that, ever since his escape attempt, the other man had been stressed in his company. He spared a glance to the sun, an hour or so from setting, before joining Peter on the ground. In the early days of his captivity, Peter was the only true solace he had had. A real friend, without ulterior motives.

"When it all goes down," Will said, once he had shared the plan with Peter, "I think you should stay as far from it as possible."

Peter nodded, still petting Winston who had stretched out between them on his back. The dog had filled out considerably since Will found him again; and his stature was thicker than any of the dogs Will had kept before the world ended. Keeping pets lean for longevity held no appeal when any day could be the last.

"I think it will be over quickly," he said, "just stay with chickens?"

"Y-yeah," Peter agreed, nodding passionately, "can't let them find the chickens."

The fondness Will had for the man swelled a little. He had the timbre of an adult but the heart and pronunciation of a child. That affection soured and turned heavy with guilt when he thought about the cause for Peter's avid protection over his birds.

"I really am sorry," he said quietly, but earnestly.

He didn't look at Peter; he was familiar enough with the workings of his mind to know that it would cause him discomfort and colour the apology with a pressure to accept it regardless of his true feelings.

"I kn-know," he replied, drawing his hands into his lap with a nervous tic motion of his head to the left. "We should go inside now," he said, shielding his eyes to peer up, side on, at the sun as it started to sink behind the house.

Sure enough, the very next day, Mathew ran breathless into the house to tell Hannibal that Beverly's people had been just on the edge of the property. After a terse back and forth – each facing the barrels of the other side's guns - they had agreed to bring their leader to the clearing the following morning. It went unspoken but, no doubt, they would bring many more people than that.

"This is good," Will said, coming up behind Hannibal who was staring intently at his followers as they mulled around the grounds, under the beating sun.

The water tower was nearly finished and, having worked all day to get to that point, Will was taking shade under the scaffolding, as Hannibal so often did. He stepped up behind the other and looped his arms around him, resting his chin on his shoulder.

“Why do you look so concerned?” He whispered in his ear.

To the others, it would look like flirtation and nothing more. Hannibal straightened a little but leant back into the touch.

“Not concerned,” he corrected, “just planning for alternate outcomes. I’m intrigued by this new group but am aware that they far outnumber us.”

Will hummed and stepped back, leaning against the side of the house. He wore his flannel unbuttoned, and was aware that Hannibal was preoccupied for the simple fact that he was not hungrily appraising his appearance.

“Dolarhyde counts as two,” Will said.

The man in question was out still, stalking through the forest. Will had become aware that he spent less time on the property than he did out in the depleted perimeter.

“Francis is an asset, but his true loyalties lie elsewhere,” Hannibal said, gazing out over the lines of crops and resting his eyes on the blind woman where she was determining the ripeness of strawberries with touch and smell. “He is here because I could offer the one he loved the best possible chance of survival. If that changes, we’ll lose him.”

Will sucked in a breath and let it out in a heavy exhale.

“Cordell?” He asked. He had not spent much time around the man, but his reading on him when he was close had not been favourable.

“Is loyal to whoever holds the most power,” Hannibal said.

“Well, surely Mathew-”

Hannibal made an amused sound.

“-was little older than a teenage when I found him and recognised his potential,” Hannibal replied, “he’s loyal, to both of us, but he’s *excitable*. He may get caught up in the fighting.”

“There won’t be any fighting,” Will said, hoping he sounded more certain than he felt.

Hannibal turned to him and joined him where the shadows were darkest. He placed a hand to Will’s bare chest and leant in to kiss him. Before he pulled away, unbeknownst to the others, he whispered.

“I’m not sure about the others. Tell me what you see.”

“Peter needs to stay out of it-” he started, but Hannibal was nodding before he had finished his sentence. “Frederick will be as useless as you’d expect, Freddie the opposite.”

“Oh?”

“She’s tenacious,” Will explained. “Katherine, she’d poke them all in the eye if you let her, but I don’t know how she’ll react to violence aimed back at her. Once I threatened to have you kill her and she seemed quite upset.”

Hannibal’s mouth spread into a Cheshire grin and he leant into Will’s space to kiss him again; this time not to cover any covert interactions – merely to enjoy his dark and darling Will.

“If it goes badly, don’t be reckless,” Will whispered, when they parted. “I wasn’t being completely manipulative when I said I didn’t want to lose you.”

Chapter End Notes

If you'd like sneak peeks of the chapters during the week between updates, then head over to my Tumblr: thewanderingcannibal.tumblr.com I post little bits and bobs as I'm writing :)

Chapter 34

Three hours after sunrise, The Guru stood opposite Hannibal, with the forest at his back. He was burly, with greying black hair and prominent frown lines. The kind of opponent who would be near-immovable in a fight; imbued with brute strength. The two scouts, Brian and Jimmy, stood on either side – mirrored by Dolaryhyde and Cordell who were flanking Hannibal. He had chosen his most imposing followers and was glad of it now. Despite their stature, however, they were armed only with pistols and knives while the three men across from them held machine guns and donned faded tactical gear.

For now, the majority of Hannibal's community lurked several hundred feet back in the tunnel. They had taken to lighting the majority of it with camping lanterns, to dissuade any of the winged creatures from holing up there during the day, but from the outside it appeared as dark and foreboding as any other cave might. Hannibal was certain that for every one of his people awaiting his command in the rocky cavern, The Guru had a matching contender skulking amongst the trees.

"Thank you for joining us," Hannibal said, shoulders back, stance relaxed – bordering on cocky. "I believe we have something of yours."

"Yes," The Guru replied, from behind gritted teeth and then, in a voice that echoed around them several seconds after he had finished speaking added; 'and we would very much like her back."

"No time for pleasantries?" Hannibal quipped.

The two men beside his opponent shuffled, guns aimed at the ground. Hannibal's eyes darted to their fingers, aware that they would take aim and shoot in a matter of seconds if told to do so.

"No interest in them," The Guru corrected. "Where is she?"

Hannibal narrowed his eyes at the other man. He was dogged and severe; the exact type of person he would have enjoyed tormenting a lifetime ago. If The Guru had truly been FBI then Hannibal likely had, he realised with no small amount of pleasure.

"Safe and sound," Hannibal assured him, "awaiting a deal to be struck."

The stance of the strapping man across from him grew taut.

"How do I know I can trust you?" he demanded.

"I imagine you know very well that you can't," Hannibal allowed, tilting his head and peering beyond three men to the endless depth of trees beyond. "Which is exactly why you've brought back up."

As if on cue, the click of several guns cocking sounded. Hannibal smiled genially at the invisible threat.

“I’m feeling similarly distrustful,” he reasoned, loudly, and the first throng of his own people spilled out from the tunnel with pistols aimed.

Mathew, Hampson and Freddie stayed back, but Will closed the distance to replace Cordell as planned. No one else was better able to predict conflict before it flared. Setting eyes on Beverly’s leader for the first time, he realised he seemed vaguely familiar. Perhaps in his past life, when the man had been nearly seven years younger and no doubt less world-weary, Will had seen him in passing. It would make sense. The Guru and his people had set up camp in the very building that housed Will’s old classroom. If he had not lived as far as possible from his place of work, he may have ended up as a part of their community when the world ended. He didn’t ponder that for too long; he was content to be standing on his side of the clearing.

The people that emerged from the treeline in response, added to the surreality of the situation. The FBI, and any similar establishment, was long since dissolved – though one might not have thought so when faced with The Guru’s armoured entourage. Will studied the stance and expression of the leader and glanced at the steady trigger fingers of his followers. Close enough to happy with what he saw there, he turned to Hannibal and nodded once.

“I imagine we’d all like to be done with the tedious business before the sun starts to set,” Hannibal said, as calm as if he were speaking to a friendly acquaintance. “If you’ll follow me.”

He turned his back to them, flagrantly unthreatened, only stopping to look over his shoulder when The Guru made no move to follow.

“Bring someone with you if you’d like,” he said, “the majority of our people can keep each other company here while they wait.”

It served to remind The Guru that there was not much sense in killing him, or keeping him, if it meant Hannibal leaving his own people out for the taking. With a set jaw, The Guru motioned for the dark-haired man to his right and they both followed Hannibal and Will to the mouth of the tunnel. They didn’t seem surprised to find several more of Hannibal’s followers within. They passed them silently, moving steadily upwards through to flickering of lamplights towards the house.

In the basement, Beverly had risen unsteadily to her feet. Her half-smile was shaky, but her relief was palpable when her eyes landed on her people emerging from the gap the steel cabinets had left behind. The Guru breathed her name, but his eyes turned hard as he catalogued her injuries. Will watched his fingers twitch around his gun.

“Undo the cuffs,” the leader demanded, voice bordering on a growl.

“Quid pro quo,” Hannibal answered, nonchalant. “Not until we’ve made the trade.”

The dark-haired man at The Guru’s side had shuffled towards Beverly and was talking to her in a hushed voice.

“She can’t stay here while we get the guns, she’s injured,” he spoke up, avoiding Hannibal and Will entirely to implore to his leader instead.

“Zee,” Bev said, shaking her head, “it’s fine, I’m fine. Let’s just get this over with.”

She reached out to place a shackled hand on his shoulder, but his chin remained raised defiantly.

“So long as you leave another in her place, it’s all the same to me,” Hannibal suggested.

The Guru let out an exasperated sound.

“Then we’re back where we started.” He said, “I’ll take one of yours. Any marks you leave on Zeller will be repaid tenfold.”

The proffered man swallowed audibly but seemed set on replacing his friend.

“Certainly,” Hannibal agreed, about to suggest just the man for the job before Beverly piped up.

“We’ll take Will,” she said, firm but sending an expression that bordered on apologetic Will’s way.

For the first time that day, Hannibal’s composure faltered. Will watched his jaw tick and hoped he wasn’t about to do something reckless.

“That’s fair,” Will acquiesced, planning to do whatever it took to help this run smoothly.

“Absolutely not,” Hannibal said, before Will had even finished speaking. “Will is a highly valued member of our community.”

The Guru, clearly basking in his apparent upper hand, smiled for the first time and gave a single nod.

“Then none of us have anything to worry about, do we?” he challenged, and Will had the sickening feeling that the leaders would manage to goad one another into a fight that ended the lives of everyone in the house and beyond.

Taking hold of Hannibal’s wrist, Will drew his attention to him.

“I’ll come back,” he assured him, and then quietly enough that the words were barely audible between them added; “I’ve survived *you.* I think I’ll be alright.”

The jest did little to lighten the mood, Hannibal’s hand striking out lightning-fast to grip Will’s in return. They did not kiss, it would feel too much like a goodbye, but they did rest their foreheads together for one long moment. When The Guru cleared his throat Will feared it was the final straw, but Hannibal merely crossed the room and freed Beverly from her restraints. It almost felt too good to be true, when Will descended the tunnel once more without a single person dying.

They rode in the back of a prison van, Will dressed for the part in FBI issue cuffs. There were no windows in the back of the rolling metal prison, and Will was thankful to be spared the indignity of another hessian sack. The two benches were long. Will sat alone on his, While Beverely sat directly opposite him, weak and propped up by the The Guru and Jimmy on either side. Two more women, one with a pinched face and the other young and with dirty blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, shared the space.

“You left Zee?” Jimmy had hissed, as they manhandled Will up into the back of the van.

“He’ll be okay,” Beverley had assured him, “as long as we have Will here.”

“What’s the deal with him?” The pinched faced woman asked, and Will ducked his head, bit his tongue and tried not to let his raised hackles show. He had always hated being the centre of attention and being spoken about as if he weren’t there was grating.

“He’s the Leader’s favourite,” Beverley said dismissively.

“Then he’ll know something about our missing people,” The Guru snarled, looming over him.

“Maybe not,” Beverly said, probably to save him, “They took him same as they took me, only Will was there a lot longer.”

“Stockholm syndrome?” Jimmy asked, raising his brows when Will glared up at him from beneath his curls.

The FBI Headquarters, with its dark grey brick, industrial windows, and sharp, protruding stories like jutting brows, had always seemed a little post-apocalyptic to Will. Seeing it after so long was shocking in that very little had changed. They’d made good time, and the sun was only just off centre in the sky as Will was barrelled through the derelict foyer and through multiple, guarded doors. In direct contrast to the familiar exterior, the interior had changed drastically. Windows were boarded, furniture piled against superfluous doorways, and candlelight sent shadows stretching up around them. Offices had become makeshift living spaces with camping beds and butane stoves. Will’s breath caught as they passed a room that housed a one-eared plush bunny and several well-loved children’s books. The butt of a gun connected with the space between his shoulder blades when he slowed, and he stumbled for several seconds before righting himself.

When they reached the cold, steel armoury, Will was shoved into a corner with no small amount of force. He imagined Hannibal’s reaction to seeing him manhandled that way, and found some solace in the image of disembodied hands and weapon cages doused in blood.

Rushed and red-faced, The Guru’s followers stacked a significant number of guns by the door to be loaded into the van. It struck Will that they planned to load themselves up too, and trundle back to the camp all before dark; a reckless notion though he supposed he and Hannibal would likely do the same for the other.

As much as he felt like a scolded child, cross-legged on the floor and largely ignored, Will survived this brief captivity unscathed. He was hauled to his feet, and then back out to the

van, before long and though the sun was on the wrong side of the sky, The Guru and his people pushed on with a grim sort of determination.

Chapter 35

Months ago, when Will had first been brought to the community, he would not have believed that the sight of the house on the hill with it's looming barbed-wire fence would be a welcome one. Now, as the back doors to the FBI van swung open to reveal his former prison, he sighed in relief. The metal barrier glinting against the orange of the evening sky and the sun-bleached wooden planks across the windows brought only one word to mind. *Home*. He tripped over his feet a little as The Guru hurried him from the back of the van. It was the same rough treatment he had been dealt since they had taken him earlier, but only now did it make Will anxious.

Hannibal had emerged from the mouth of the tunnel, as if he'd been lurking there in the shadows since Will had been taken, and now his lips tightened as he scrutinised each hurrying motion and heavy hand. His eyes were shark black, as they had been when he'd found Will freezing, on the verge of death, among the dark density of the trees and its beastly inhabitants.

"Hannibal," Will sighed, as he was freed from the cuffs and began crossing the clearing.

He slipped his arms around the other when he reached him and felt himself being encompassed in return. Hannibal smelt strongly of the aftershave Will had brought him back from his excursion and, for a moment, Will pictured him moping in his room – lathering himself in the fragrance and bemoaning the fact that he had been denied Will's presence for all of a day.

"Will," Hannibal breathed his name on an exhale which made Will suspect that he had been smelling him as well.

He huffed a laugh and buried his face against the broad chest; shoulders unspooling from the tension he hadn't even been aware of until that moment. Hannibal brought a firm hand to the back of his head and held him there. His past self - the silent, harrowed man warming calloused hands over a butane stove in the darkness of a vast and barren apartment building – would have found this level of human contact suffocating. This Will, the one that had carved a smile into another's face and watched with something close to tranquillity as his victim was further sliced to death at the hands of the man holding him, longed to stay this way forever.

"I missed you," Will choked out with a self-conscious laugh.

"Never again," Hannibal replied, fervently enough to suggest that Will had been gone for decades.

For a second, the arms around Will tightened uncomfortably but he sank further into them and pressed a placating kiss to Hannibal's neck.

"Are you done?" The Guru barked from behind him.

Will looked up in time to see Hannibal's lips tighten again and went stiff in his arms.

"Hannibal," he whispered against his shirt, "please don't do anything drastic."

A kiss to the top of the head was all the response Hannibal gave him.

"With Will?" Hannibal called mockingly, "I don't imagine I will ever be *done*."

It wasn't hard to imagine the narrowing of Hannibal's eyes; meant to poke and provoke. Will heard an uncomfortable grunt and went a little red-faced as Hannibal caught his mouth in a smothering kiss and then sucked Will's bottom lip between his teeth and held him there a moment too long.

"Stop," he hissed, and then when Hannibal cupped his cheek as though he had no intention of doing so Will added, "later."

He ducked out of the other's arms but took hold of his hand to take the sting out of the rejection and to lead Hannibal – and therefore everyone else – back towards the tunnel.

When the entire entourage had forced the cabinets aside and spilled into the bright basement, they found Zeller quite unharmed, if a little skittish. His relief left him in an audible gush of air when he caught sight of The Guru shouldering his way past the others, including Hannibal himself who merely quirked his lips in response.

"Unchain him," The Guru demanded, as Price swept past them all and crouched to check Zeller over for damage.

"The guns first, if you would," Hannibal responded, inscrutably calm as ever.

A moment of silence followed, in which the two leaders appeared to be sizing one another up. It was broken by Price's disgruntled voice, thrown over his shoulder;

"Just give him the damn guns!"

Dragging his hands over his face, Will considered thanking him. The sooner The Guru was out of their hair, the sooner Will could stop fretting about Hannibal acting on emotion and putting their lives at risk.

Several duffle bags changed hands, Zeller was uncuffed, and they all descended the tunnel in icy silence.

For the first trade Will had ever taken part in, he felt it went relatively well…that is, until they escorted the other's to the clearing again only to find that the sky had already burst into the deep reds and purples of evening. Will felt Hannibal practically buzzing with excitement beside him, even as he appeared as stoic and stone-faced as ever.

“Everyone in the van,” The Guru ordered, though only half of his people made to do as they were told.

“...*Jack*,” Price began, but was cut off.

“In. The. Van.” The Guru repeated, with more urgency this time. In the hollowed stone passage, his voice echoed back to him and he winced at his own volume.

Jimmy stayed rooted to the spot, AK47 slung over his shoulder and hands on his hips. Will wanted to shove him out of cave in the same vain as a pensioner escorting hooligans from his yard. Jimmy pointed to the sky, letting the encroaching darkness speak for itself.

“You’re more than welcome to stay the night.”

Though Will had suspected as much from Hannibal, he still flinched at the suggestion.

“I dare say your chances of getting back to the old FBI headquarters are looking bleak.”

The Guru, scoffing in response, pressed forward – grabbing Jimmy’s arm as if to haul him out alongside him but, before he could, the other had turned to consider Hannibal.

“How do we know you’ll let us go, come morning?” He asked, his feigned, lofty tone doing little to mask his unease from Will’s ears.

Hannibal flicked his eyes to The Guru and back, in what Will could only describe as his leader’s version of a triumphant smirk, before replying.

“My community is unable to extend the offer of hospitality further than tonight. Too many mouths to feed.”

It was a screaming double entendre, for all that The Guru and his people were blind to it. Will kept his lips sealed regardless; it seemed the other community’s fate was more or less settled. Leave and be torn limb from limb by screeching beasts or stay and be served with a side of fava beans. The outcome was depressing, but it was out of his hands. Exhausted, but glad that at least Beverly had escaped being eaten, Will pinched the bridge of his nose and turned to climb the tunnel once more – unwilling to wait around while the other’s decided on their own cause of death.

A little later, after Will had expressed to Winston the appropriate level of regret for leaving him and then washed and dressed for bed, Hannibal appeared in the doorway and considered him for an unsettling length of time.

“You’re upset,” he observed, after perhaps a full five minutes in which Will refused to lift his eyes from his book and be the first to break the silence.

“Not upset,” he corrected, peeling back to covers to beckon Hannibal closer, “resigned.”

He reached out to help Hannibal from his clothes, satisfied when the other joined him in bed, pressed to his side, entirely naked.

“They chose to stay, then?” He asked, placing his book face down on the bedside table and curling against Hannibal.

His hand found its way to the other’s chest, drawing invisible circles there.

“They did.”

“And since even you couldn’t dispatch of that many people so quickly, I assume they’re still alive?”

A hand reached up to snatch hold of his own. Will let it be lifted to Hannibal’s lips and waited with a raised brow while he kissed each knuckle.

“They are,” Hannibal sighed, eventually. “They’re waiting to be fed.”

“To whom?” Will asked, only partially in jest.

Hannibal chuckled regardless and gave his hand one more kiss before dropping it back to his chest.

“We’re eating form our reserves tonight,” he said.

“Really?” Will asked, tapping his fingers against the dark hair of Hannibal’s chest before tracing it down to the thicker, more wiry hair just below his belly button.

“Yes,” Hannibal said, in a levelled tone despite the way his stomach tensed from Will’s touch. “I came to invite you to join us but now I find myself undressed and trapped beneath you.”

Will flung his leg over Hannibal and, letting out a quivering breath when their cocks pressed together through the thin, tenting fabric of his boxers, leant in to whisper in the other’s ear.

“Now you’re trapped beneath me.”

A pleased rumble sounded from Hannibal’s chest and he reached down to pull Will’s sleep shirt up and over his head. When Will kicked off his boxers with equal enthusiasm, Hannibal lunged forward to flip them.

“Now *you’re* trapped beneath *me*,” he purred.

“Poor me,” Will chuckled, hooking his ankles together beneath Hannibal’s ass to urge him forward.

“Slow down, Mylimasis.”

Hannibal reached down to take them both in hand and they gasped in tandem.

“No,” Will groaned, pushing half-heartedly against the other, “I want you in me.”

With a dark smile, the other tugged again against their lengths.

“With our guests just downstairs?” He asked, voice just gravelling enough for Will to settle comfortably in the knowledge that Hannibal was as affected as he himself.

“I’ll be quiet,” Will sighed, his hips grinding down of their own accord.

Hannibal ducked his head down to nip at Will’s neck.

“We’ll see about that,” he said, voice low.

Will shuddered as the other reached out to his bedside table. They no longer wasted time by keeping the lube stashed away in a drawer. In a matter of seconds his fingers were slicked and probing at Will’s entrance. Will held out for a short while, grinding his teeth and swallowing down his moans while Hannibal worked him open at a torturous pace. When Hannibal added a second finger and scissored them in one sharp motion, Will made a strangled sound but managed to catch it in his throat before lifting his head to scowl down at the man between his legs. A second later he was panting, dropping it back down to the pillow and twisting his hands in the sheets as Hannibal’s fingers pumped into him faster and faster. When a third finger joined the others, Will gave in and moaned aloud, not caring that Hannibal made a triumphant sound in response or that, when he quite suddenly sank down to encompass Will’s cock in the wet warmth of his mouth, Will’s sounds increased in volume.

“Hannibal. Now,” he groaned, “*please*.”

Hannibal hummed askance against the sensitive head of his cock and Will cried out.

“Christ. Hannibal, fuck me,” Will yelled, as if his voice had been yanked from him against his will.

There was no time to fret about the consequences though, as Hannibal slammed into him and let out a long, low satisfied sound of his own. He took a moment, fully sheathed inside of Will with his head hung down and his hair fallen loose across his brow, before pulling out and pushing back in again; setting an urgent pace with enough force the shift Will up along the bed. Will felt as full as the first time; wanton and writhing against the man above him. Hannibal’s hands were on his hips, digging crescents into his skin, but as their pace picked up he found Will’s hands and entwined their fingers; pinning him to the bed. As that aching, deep-seated pleasure grew, they both found a more frantic pace – all pretence at staying quiet forgotten.

Will came first, untouched and with a raw cry and lay sated and boneless for the several seconds it took Hannibal to join him. Neither pulled away; Hannibal collapsing on top of Will with Will himself too tired care that his mess was going tacky between them. There was a long stretch of peace, both men too spent to move, and then Hannibal propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at Will.

“I believe it’s time for dinner,” he said cordially, as if his softened cock wasn’t still inside of Will.

This time when Will groaned, he sounded distinctly less pleased.

End Notes

Agh, reading this through there was so much I wanted to change! Five years have passed so I suppose it's only natural for my writing style to have changed. I really don't have the time though! I had to settle for correcting a few spelling/grammatical errors I didn't pick up on the first time. Those of you who enjoyed this story the first time around will be happy to know that I plan to actually finish it this time!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!